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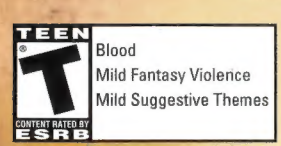

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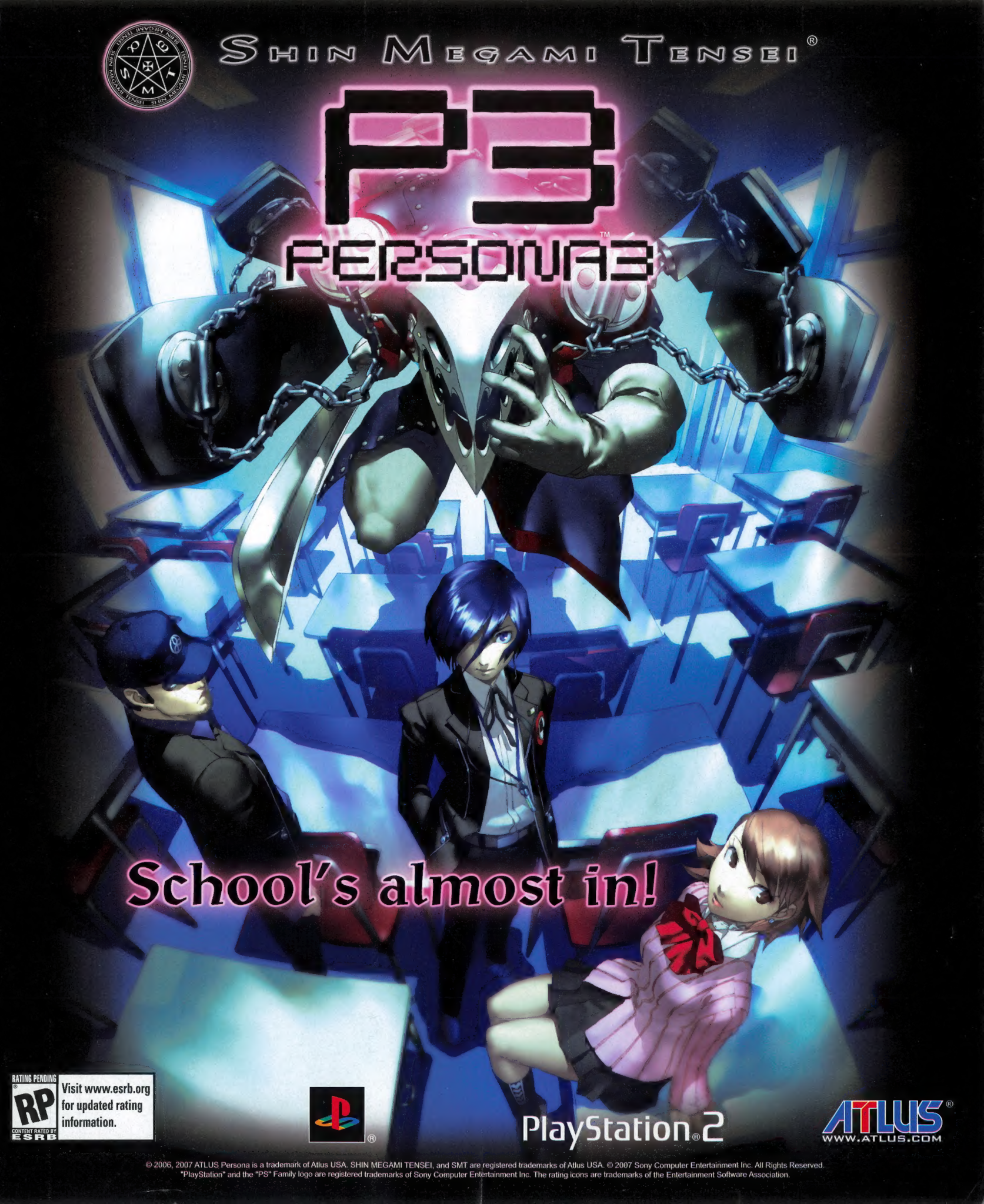

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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Wii need to talk...

First off: my thanks to everyone who wrote in regarding last month's column. Our little Q&A has blossomed into its own feature so check it out in the July issue. Meanwhile, there's plenty to talk about these days such as the upcoming E3-lite, the continued resurgence of retro gaming, the PS3's astonishing fall/winter lineup, a K-Fed/Paris Hilton "If they mated," but nothing quite as fascinating as the peculiar state of the Nintendo's Wii.

The deeper into the system's first generation we get, the more apparent it's become that our worst fears have indeed materialized. Third parties are reluctant to develop Wii-specific games that cater to the system's strengths, choosing instead to either retrofit PS2 games, strip down their next-gen titles, or pass altogether. The funny thing is that it doesn't seem to matter. The few original games that are available are selling like mad and Nintendo still can't keep the Wii on store shelves. The bottom line is that regardless of what third parties do, the Wii is exceeding expectations while charting its own course, which bears the question: Does Nintendo really need third-party ports to succeed? I see the Wii as the perfect second system for enthusiast gamers or the ultimate hardware for younger gamers or casual gamers. Considering that is the case, I can't imagine why Nintendo is allowing third parties a free ride. It's not good for consumers or the platform. Wouldn't we and Nintendo be better off with a few Wii-exclusive games each month rather than a parade of poser games? ...At least make them work with the Wii pad. If Nintendo were to establish guidelines for publishers perhaps they'd be surprised at how many would fall in line. As loyal as Nintendo users are, I can't imagine publishers turning their back on the system, especially given the lower cost and shorter development time needed to create exclusive Wii content.

I mean, take a look at Mario Galaxy...that's normal mapping. This is powerful hardware, but nobody is using it. It's really a shame. Project Treasure Island Z, NiGHTS, Metroid Prime 3: Corruption, No More Heroes, FF Crystal Chronicles: Crystal Bearers, Battalion Wars 2, Super Smash Bros. Brawl, Super Mario Galaxy... anyone out there not going to catch 'em all? Three to five Wii exclusives a month and I see a cottage industry all its own, however, if Nintendo continues to go head to head with HD gaming, allowing third parties to squander their brand, this story may not have such a happy ending.

Before I let you go, I have to say that in all my years of publishing no single cover has ever had an impact quite like Odin Sphere. We're working on those posters...

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

play magazine staff

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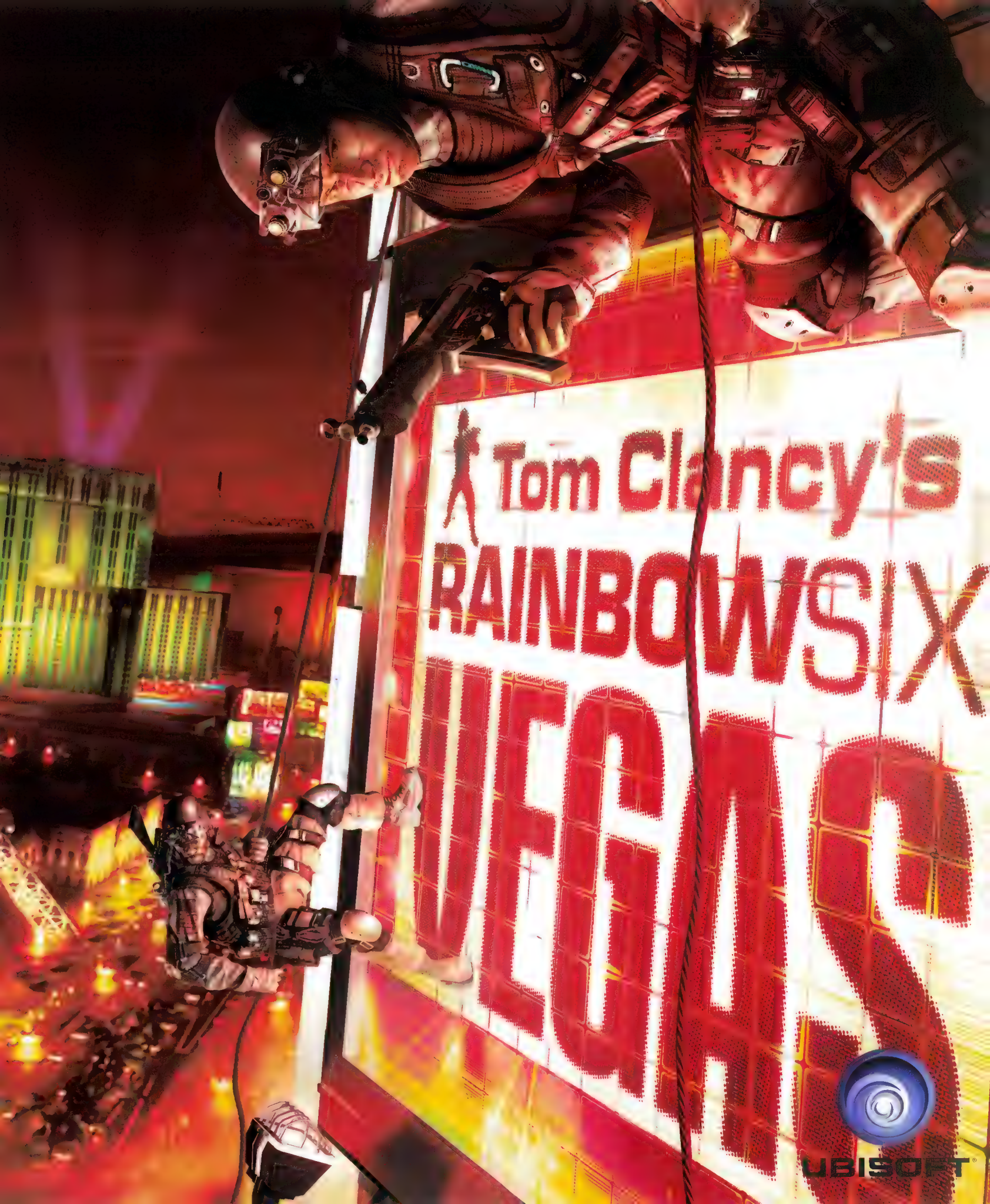
Tom Clancy's
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playback

June 2007

letters@playmagazine.com

We received such an outpouring of answers in regards to the May issue Letter From the Editor that we're putting together a feature for next month's issue. Here's a sampling in the meantime...

How important is realism to next-gen? Realism pretty much comes in handy depending on the game at hand. With a Tom Clancy game, like Rainbow Six Vegas or GRAW 2, a player expects the game to be as intense as a real firefight. But with something like, say, NBA Street Homecourt, realism goes out the window in favor of something more stylish. So I'd say that the realism factor depends solely on the game content, and how the developer/publisher team shapes around it.

What do you consider realism? Again, depends on game content. If a soldier's going through a huge battle in the middle of a city, the city has to look real, the soldiers should look as realistic as possible, and, most importantly, the action should be realistic. If the game feels fake in any way then it won't sell the player. Lifelike would be the best way to describe my thoughts on realism.

If a game is visually appealing, but doesn't make a step forward from a gameplay perspective, how do you treat it in terms of ratings? It depends how fun the game really is. NBA Street Homecourt doesn't really push the envelope as much as NBA Street V3 did, changing the dynamics of the gameplay to the point that it feels like a whole new game. But it remains a blast to play, so who cares? Same with Red Star. People could look at this and talk about how the gameplay doesn't really push the envelope any. But the game's so much fun it really shouldn't matter.

What if a game is advanced from a storytelling or gameplay perspective, but not graphics? Is it next-gen or just a good game? Some people might be disappointed with the lack of a next-gen approach, but that doesn't mean the game doesn't evolve in some way. Look at Eets: Chowdown, released on the XBLA service this week. Does it look like a next-gen game? Hell no. Neither does Alien Hominid HD. But both games have gameplay quirks that fit right in to the next-gen theme, and help push it along. A game doesn't necessarily have to change the scene in all directions to be considered a next-gen masterpiece. It helps, of course, but it's not a requirement.

What does your average reader consider next-gen, from your experience? Is the concept important to them? Well, yes and no. Yes, gamers want their Xbox 360 s and want to be able to get online and crush the competition in a spiffy-looking game. But by the same token, PS2 games continue to sell well, most notably the stellar God of War II and, hopefully, Red Star. Next-gen seems just like another platform, instead of an evolutionary scale. But people still have a good time with it anyhow.

How important is the story and writing? Depends on the audience. Some people I know go thoroughly into a game's storyline, such as Lost Planet, while others just want to hit the start button and direct their own storyline, treading their own path. The option to do either remains one of gaming's greater freedoms, letting them decide if they want to listen and get all the details or just take a chance on the common knowledge they already carry.
Still, if a game can concoct a stunning twist or a good, gripping story, it always helps.

With Xbox Live Arcade, Virtual Console, and Sony's download services, is it important that a game appear to be next-gen at all? While downloading services offer a dose of what gaming could be on an independent or classic level, it's always important to strive ahead in technology and develop a new sense of fun. Having the kind of hardware that the PS3 and 360 provide (along with the Wii, of course), developers have options to reach new horizons and try something new. By the same token, if they want to go a simpler route, there's the online services within their reach.

Is multiplayer necessary for next-gen? What makes a next-gen MMO or are MMO's and social interaction games by definition next-gen? Multiplayer has been around long before next-gen, harkening back to the good ol' days of fighting against a friend in Street Fighter II on the SNES. It does have an important place in next-gen, being able to face competition online with very little lag and lots of freshness injected into a product. I say it's quite a necessary component, although those who want single-player experiences can still have them. Again, the freedom of choice wins out.

Name three things you hoped you'd see come out of the next generation, but haven't yet. Hmm, tough one, because a lot of this ground has been covered.
I'd say cross-platform networking (which would make for an ideal gaming universe, but oh well), more push for franchises to evolve for the next-gen scene (God of War III won't be here until WHEN?), and better catering to the hardcore gaming crowd... although that is continually getting better with more US releases like Senko no Rondo and Project Sylpheed.

When do you anticipate we'll be able to stop using the word next-gen? All the new consoles are out now. Do we have to wait for the PS2 to die? Once the Nintendo Wii and Sony PS3 establish game libraries on the same level as the Xbox 360, that's when I say we have arrived. As far as PS2, it can thrive for another year or two before it eventually fades away from the scene. It's just a shame that the Xbox and GameCube had to die as quickly as they did.

"...I feel like this is a great time in our industry right now."

What game do you consider to be truly next-gen? No question in my mind. MotorStorm. Sony had a lot on the line with this game and it came through for me in every aspect. Graphics, gameplay, destruction, course design...it's all there. More courses would be nice, and better multiplayer options would be novel, but this works just swell for me.

-Robert Workman

How important is realism to next-gen? To the broad market: quite important. To the not-so-few who enjoy fantasy: not as much.

What do you consider realism? Basically, modelling the characters, setting and physics based on reality is realism. Some examples: Seeing depth in the scar on Marcus Fenix's face, hair follicles, etc. is realism. Odin Sphere is not realism. It looks fantastic, but not real. Final Fantasy X-XII is fantasy based realism; that is, FF makes a fantasy world appear real.

If a game is visually appealing, but doesn't make a step forward from a gameplay perspective, how do you treat it in terms of ratings? Fairly. Visual appeal is important. We watch movies which are largely based on visual appeal and there is no gameplay involved there. Example: Before 4, the Resident Evil series would often be chastised for all the backtracking, and characters that moved like a tank. I feel that gameplay sacrifices necessarily had to be made in order to accommodate the cinematic, changing, fixed camera perspective used. I think these games were very visually appealing, though the gameplay was admittedly rather tired and laborious, yet I would still rate these games highly.

What does your average reader consider next gen, from your experience? Is the concept important to them?
It is important, but not all-consuming. I am very much looking forward to Odin Sphere, a game I would not consider "next-gen."

-Sean S

Back to the future?
Could we possibly be seeing the re-emergence of the old school amidst the next generation? It's sure looking that way. Let's just take a look at what's coming up here. Raiden III, a shooter that was a big hit in Japan, came out today from UFO Interactive. Red Star, after so many delays, is finally arriving next week (confirmed by XS Games- yes, start salivating). Taito Legends 2 and Taito Legends: Power Up, both great collections in their own right, are coming this summer from Destineer. A new NiGHTS is coming from Sega (although I pray they don't screw it up). Project Sylpheed got snagged by Microsoft for US release. Senko no Rondo is coming via Ubisoft. Earth Defense Force already got a release (and I'm loving it). Katamari's getting more love on the 360 and PS3. And so on.
It's not just the old school but the "quirky" markets, the shmup market and the Japanese/Euro curiosity markets. It's really quite cool how a lot more game companies are paying attention to the hardcore gaming audience while also indulging the attention of mainstream folks. Maybe I'm just babbling on but I feel like this is a great time in our industry right now, where we're not just getting the big commercial releases. Makes me happy, for a change.

Robert "The DCD"

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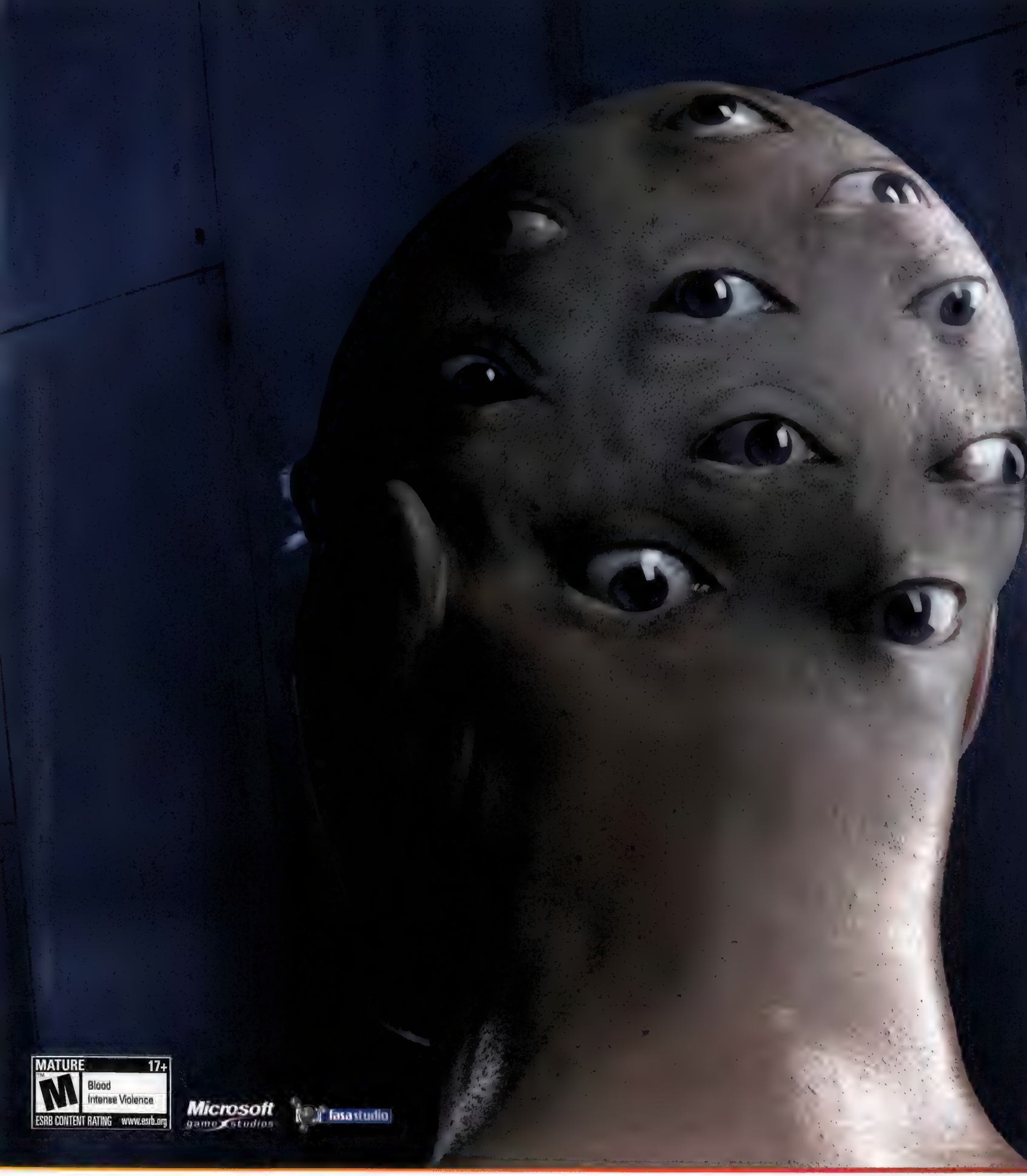

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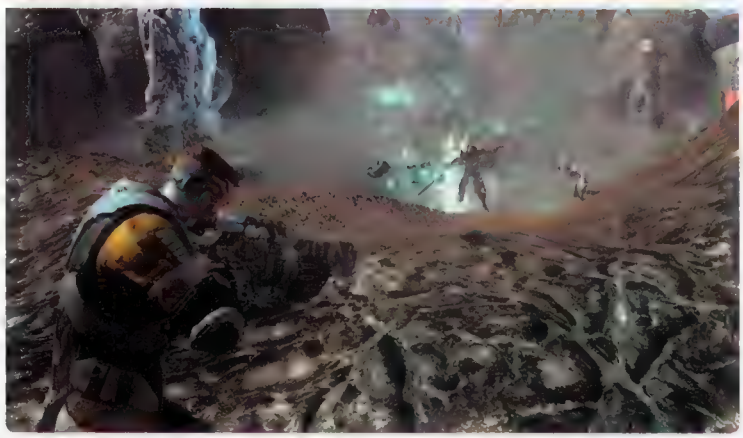


Who's your daddy?

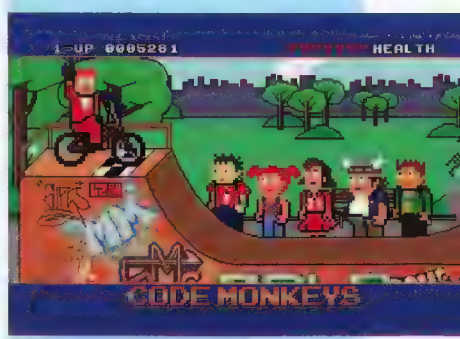
Fallout boy...

Somewhere Patrick Stewart breathed a sigh of relief when Bethesda Softworks (creators of The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion) recently announced that Liam Neeson would lead the cast in the highly anticipated Fallout 3. The role of the main character's father was actually written with Liam in mind and is said to set the tone for the entire game. "It's been a pleasure bringing the father to life and working with the wonderfully talented people at Bethesda on Fallout 3," said Neeson. "I hope the fans of the franchise and the game will be excited by the results."

8-bit TV

New original series 4 G4

From the peculiar mind of Adam de la Peña, keep an eye out for the new original animated series airing on G4 this summer—Code Monkeys, which follows the exploits of a group of 1980s video game programmers whose adventures are told through Super Nintendo style videogame graphics. Executive Producer de la Peña has been a busy man of late providing voices for the 2006 adult swim series "Minoriteam" which he also created (about a group of superheroes who use racial stereotypes in order to combat racial stereotypes via a cast with names like "Dr. Wang," "Jewcano," and "Fasto") after creating and starring in "I'm with Busey" in which he was charged with making Gary Busey appear human. Adam also wrote for and appeared in Comedy Central's The Man Show and Crank Yankers and writes for Jimmy Kimmel Live. But we forgive him.



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Fun with numbers

June 2007: Movie games

Going into another summer of blockbuster films and the games they inspire, here's a sampling of how some of the higher profile movie games have faired in seasons past.

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Spider Man the Movie 2	**Activision**	**2,158,000** *(PS2 1.5m, Xbox 658k)*
Lord of the Rings RotK	**EA**	**1,755,000** *(PS2 1.2 m, Xbox 555k)*
Shrek 2	**Activision**	**1,310,000** *(PS2 975k, Xbox 335k)*
The Incredibles	**THQ**	**1, 053,000** *(PS2 802k, Xbox251k)*
Cars	**THQ**	**1,050,000** *(PS2 811k, Xbox 239k)*
James Bond: Everything or Nothing	**EA**	**1,029,000** *(PS2 687k, Xbox 342k)*
Peter Jackson's King Kong	**Ubisoft**	**888,000** *(PS2 573k, Xbox 315k)*
Lord of the Rings	**Vivendi (Sierra)**	**750,000** *(PS2 474k, Xbox 276k)*
Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban	**EA**	**515,000** *(PS2 404, Xbox 115k)*
Chronicles of Narnia	**Disney Int.**	**435,000** *(PS2 307k, Xbox 135k)*
Over the Hedge	**Activision**	**410,000** *(PS2 235k, Xbox 131k)*
Batman Begins	**EA**	**366,000** *(PS2 235k, Xbox 131k)*
Van Helsing	**Vivendi (Sierra)**	**288,000** *(PS2 180k, Xbox 108k)*
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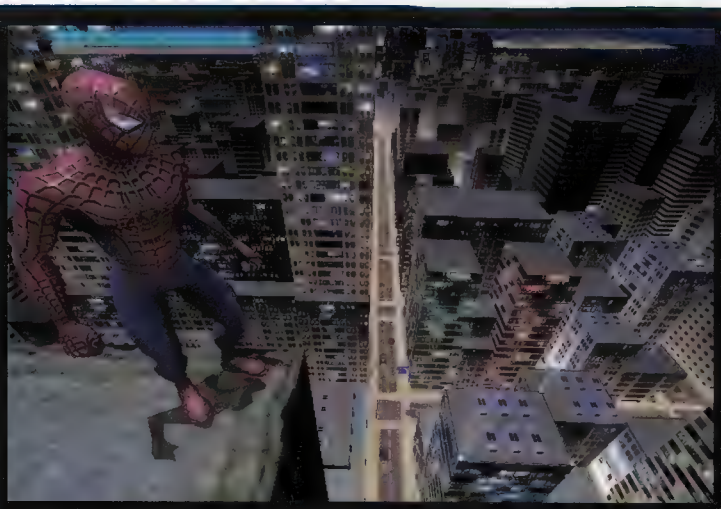
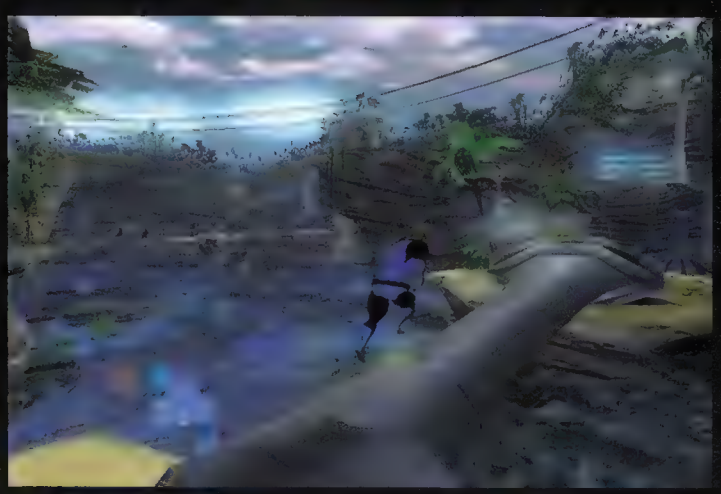
Shrek	**Take2**	**193,000** *(Xbox only)*
Ghost Rider	**2K**	**98,000** *(PS2 only)*





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HELLBOY

...Meet the ones who bump back

words Dave Halverson

Anung Un Rama, a.k.a. Hellboy, was summoned to earth near the end of World War II by Nazi occultist Grigori Rasputin to turn the tide of the war. Too bad he didn't live long enough to see that what hell coughed up was a cute little monkey boy with red skin, horns, a tail and a stone hand. Intercepted by Allied Forces scientist Professor Bruttenholm, the cute little hell spawn was adopted and raised by the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense (BPRD), where he grew up to become the world's greatest paranormal investigator, and they all lived happily ever after... Except for the fact that demons from hell keep dropping in to say hello. Working together with the agency's various quasi-human cohorts, including amphibian/humanoid Abe Sapien, and Liz Sherman, a pyrokinetic who gives new meaning to the term internal combustion, keeping humanity off the paranormal menu is job one.

Although the Dark Horse comics are the most successful not published by Marvel, DC or Image, Hellboy's big break came when Guillermo Del Toro adapted the comics for a 2004 feature film starring Ron Perlman, which lead to a pair of direct-to-DVD animated films which Del Toro also consulted on, a theatrical sequel (*Hellboy 2: The Golden Army*) expected in 2008, and of course, one cool-ass video game from down under. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer hell spawn. You can have your men in tights; I'll take the Hellboys and Lobos of the world any day, especially when they're as nurtured as this franchise has been since day one. Where we often see the creator pushed aside when Hollywood comes knocking, in favor of focus groups and test audiences, Del Toro worked side by side with series originator Mike Mignola every step of the way, a dedication that's trickled all the way down to the game. It's extremely rare that we see such a collaborative effort in gaming, where a film's creator and director have a hand in the development process, but it's evident in Hellboy from the moment you hit start.

While most of the game's systems are still early, I was able to experience the Right Hand of Doom in all its demon-pounding glory. Translating Hellboy's immense power into gameplay being the most important aspect of the game, Krome places the emphasis squarely on beating the living hell out of each scenario's assorted creatures and demons, with stunning results. Aside from standard strong and fierce punches, Hellboy can charge the Hand of Doom for extreme pummeling, jump and pile drive, or, holding the right shoulder, focus punch his way through concrete, walls, and iron gates. The most satisfying moves, however, are his many grabbing attacks. Against smaller enemies, once grabbed he can drop kick them, mash them into the ground or pop their panic-stricken heads off to hurl like grenades. Versus larger enemies things get even more creative depending on the creature, and when all else fails there's always the Samaritan, Hellboy's over-sized pistol that he carries in his left hand. Combat being the catalyst of the game, it's executed with that rare ferocity where the point of impact is so violent that it resonates right through the controller.

There's also a wee bit of platforming (Krome has given Hellboy a nicely animated jump) and a variety of exploration and strategic elements to be had—especially against the game's formidable and usually

extremely large bosses. This is very much a monster-clearing endeavor—linear in nature with a limited-view camera that emphasizes cinematography over freedom—interrupted by the odd side quest or puzzle element, as you assail each massive five/six-tier set piece in locations throughout the globe.

With so much complexity in every stage it's a wonder the camera moves at all. Hellboy is one of the most detailed and strikingly beautiful games I've seen on 360, or PS3 for that matter, rivaling the likes of Gears of War, which makes the fact that everything is destructible all the more impressive. Punch a wall anywhere and it leaves a realistic imprint; brittle ledges fall away in a cloud of dust, ground attacks leave small burning craters and the smoldering Right Hand of Doom emits fire trails with each vicious swipe… Lighting, ambience, music, character design, model integrity…all first rate.

If the story, continuity, and voice acting (Ron Perlman, Selma Blair and Doug Jones all reprise their roles) follow suit, you might be looking at the comic-book adaptation to beat. Sorry all you spandex cowboys, but hell hath no fury like its prodigal son scorned.

"Krome place the emphasis squarely on beating the living hell out of each scenario's assorted creatures and demons."

INTERVIEW

Hellboy	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PS3
Developer	Krome Studios
Publisher	Konami
Available	September

INTERVIEW

An interview with Krome Studios Producer John Whiston and creative director Steve Stamatiadis

I thought for sure that your first next-gen game would star a squat bi-pedal tiger... Yet here we are fresh out of Hell. Did you find the transition from E platforming to pummeling hellish beasts a challenge or were you clamoring for a reprieve?
Steve: We like to surprise people. It's great that people associate us so closely with our TY the Tasmanian Tiger series but as a company we have a lot more breadth, and since so many of us are big Hellboy fans it wasn't that big a deal to take on the big red guy.

I'm shocked at how skillfully you guys have handled your first 360 game. This is among the most detailed games I've seen, rivaling anything the system has to offer. How did you acclimate yourselves to this degree right out of the gate?
Steve: The team has put in a LOT of long hours and hard work to get Hellboy looking as good as it does. It definitely hasn't been easy as they had to do it while our Next-Gen engine was being put together—meaning the target kept moving.

How did you guys land this project? Did Konami come to you?
Steve: Oddly enough we had talked with publishers about our interest in doing a Hellboy game even back when we were doing TY 2 and King Arthur. But it wasn't until the success of the movie that Konami got a hold of the license. I think at that point it was just a case of us begging them to let us make the game!

Is this a new proprietary engine?
John: Yes, an iteration of Krome's Proprietary Engine is being used for the development of the Hellboy game. The Merkury Engine supports next generation platforms including PS3 and Xbox 360 and integrates platform-specific programming to allow the Merkury interface (which the game programmers deal with) to be platform independent. Basically, the Engine allows us to simplify the game development process to work as efficiently as possible.

What involvement did Guillermo Del Toro and/or Mike Mignola have?
John: We've been extremely fortunate to have a lot of direct input from Guillermo Del Toro and Mike Mignola; plus a lot of support from the guys at Revolution Studios and Dark Horse Comics. They've been involved throughout the whole process and we're extremely grateful to the amount of time, effort and hard work from all parties. Guillermo and Mike are extremely cool guys, and it's been fantastic to have such excellent feedback and direction through all stages of the project —across concept stages, art style and plot direction. Both guys even attended our recent VO sessions with the Hellboy cast and have been an absolute pleasure to

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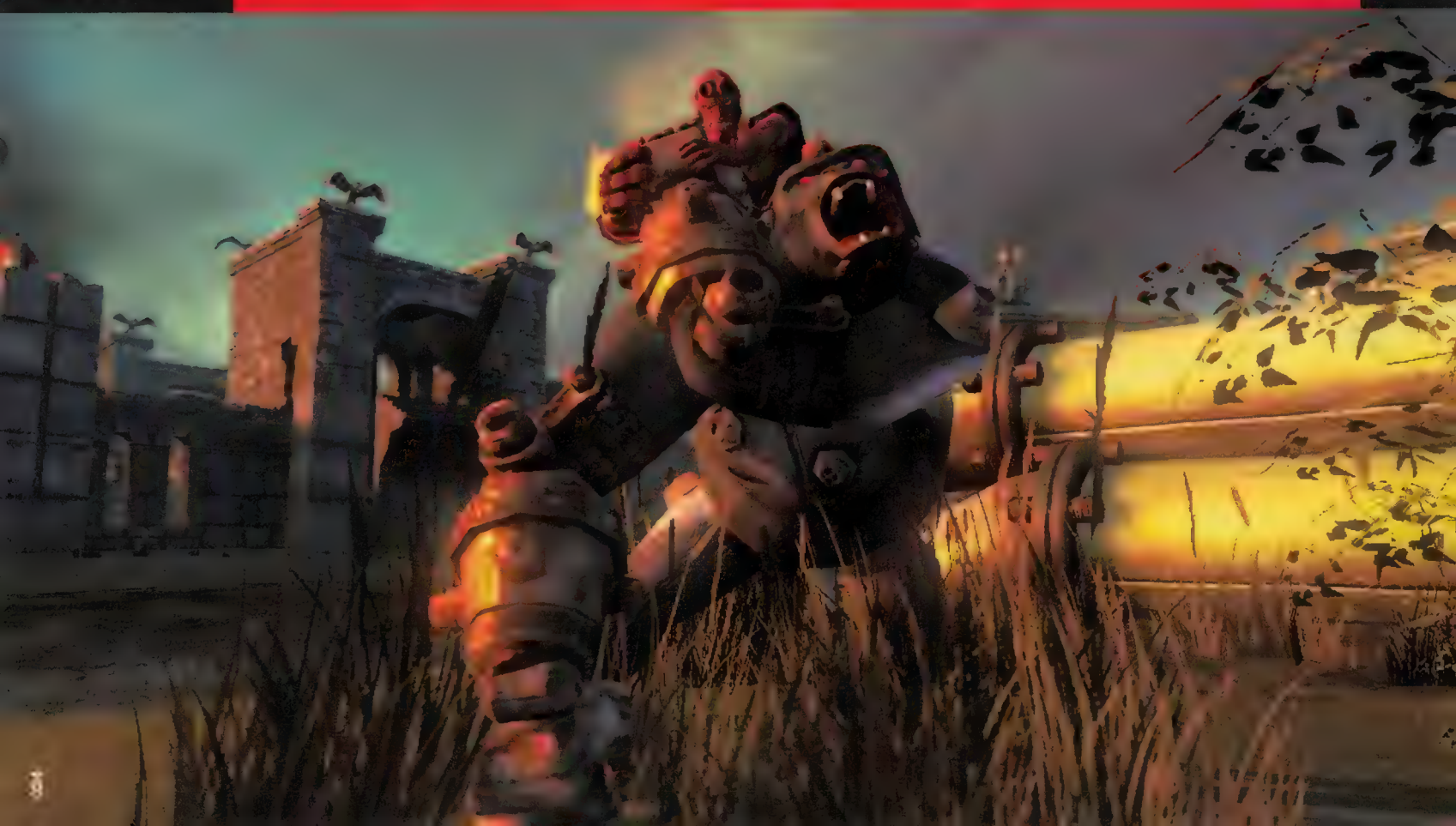


"...focus testing has certainly confirmed that players love ripping heads off enemies!"

-Producer John Wilcox

work with.

I've heard that Del Toro is great to work with.
John: Working with Guillermo Del Toro has been a fantastic experience. He is an awesome guy that really speaks his mind and doesn't pull any punches. Not only is he a MASSIVE Hellboy fan who knows everything there is to know about the universe, but he is also a keen gamer, and really knows his stuff. A few of us Kromans bumped into him at E3 last year and he is the most enthusiastic guy you could ever wish to work with.

You're obviously following the look of the film over the graphic novel. Is this due to the upcoming sequel and greater visibility of the film property?
John: Mike and Guillermo really encouraged us to establish our own take on the character and universe, but it's impossible not to be drawn toward the same sensibilities as Hellboy's film and comic incarnations. We like to think we've created a unique fusion of the two—realism with the rich dark shadows of Mignola's artwork. We're blending the iconic style of the comic with the lushness of the visual design from the movies and animated series, resulting in a Hellboy as epic-looking in game as in fans' imaginations.

Which do you prefer: the original Hellboy with the spindly legs or the new Ron Perlman version?
John: Heh, this is a tricky one... I personally love Mike's original Hellboy; I'm a sucker for that stylized look, but the jury is somewhat out here at Krome. A dev-team poll would divide the team, because let's face it: Ron Perlman was born to play Hellboy, no one else could carry this role off on film.

I couldn't agree more. Even though your Hellboy is patterned after the movie he totally has a look of his own—more agile and I love the red eyes...Did you have to clear the changes with anybody? How

much autonomy did you have?
John: Thanks very much, we've been through quite a few incarnations now (and for you, but not for [illegible] proud I'd say that version. Yes, there are our touches but we've had A LOT of involvement from the guys at Konami, and an approval process through Revolution Studios, Dark Horse and Mike Mignola. Everyone involved has been extremely cool though – and the process has been very painless with very subtle changes. Our concept and character artists are first rate, and have really nailed the Hellboy look.

Do we ever see the Bureau for Paranormal Research and Defense?
John: No… We had considered the BPRD as a mission hub early in development, but we want to get the player straight out into the thick of the action. Each chapter starts [illegible] and the team doesn't need to report back to base.

What about professor Bruttenholm or any other agency alumni?
John: Professor Bruttenholm doesn't feature in the game, but, yes, you will see other agents, including one really special guest appearance for Hellboy fans.

Did Ron Perlman do his voice over work in-house? Did he get to see the game in action? If so, what was his reaction?
John: Ron recorded his VO at a studio in LA, with our producer from Konami directing the session. Ron got some hands-on time with the game and loved it. He didn't exactly need much reference to get into character, but having the game there was key to providing background to the script.

I love that Abe Sapien is playable, however, truth be told I'd rather Liz was playable—imagine what you could do with fire… Why Abe but not Liz? Or is she in here?
John: Hey! Abe kicks some serious ass! We're really drawing on his role from the BPRD comics and the upcoming sequel, giving him a fantastic array of martial arts moves. However… I can certainly see the appeal with Liz [laughs]. I'm really pleased to say that, yes—Liz is playable—and trust me when I say that playing with fire is awesome. You'll have a blast in multiplayer!

Wow. That never happens…awesome! Since I've been skipping around levels sans cinemas, it's been hard to get a

[illegible] wicked right…

feel for the game's progression. Is it one continuous story or a chain of missions stemming from the Bureau?
John: There is an overarching narrative, split up across several chapters and locations. These aren't missions stemming from the BPRD, but an engaging adventure for Hellboy—with interaction from his Bureau colleagues along the way. We have two flashback levels which also punctuate this progression, exploring earlier Hellboy adventures which shed light on the characters and threats of the main story. While each chapter builds towards the endgame climax in some way, they also each finish off their own individual arc before thrusting Hellboy—often unwillingly!—into the next part of his adventure.

I didn't notice any ammo floating about for The Samaritan. Is ammo infinite or limited?
John: Ammo is limited, but there are plenty of pickups placed around the level, particularly for the Samaritan's standard bullets. I don't want to give too much away but we really play upon special rounds to dispatch enemies and solve puzzles. The Samaritan is a devastating and cool weapon, and we throw secret rounds into the mix for players to find and unleash.

One of the things I love about the game is the lack of any on screen (HUD) interference. Is this indicative of the early build or are you sticking to it?
John: Hmmm, this has been a really difficult call for us as we were determined throughout development to not have a HUD. We were pretty successful in conveying Hellboy's health and energy status through the runes on his arm… but for the greater good of the game we've embraced the HUD. The player collects artifacts and builds energy throughout the levels, and the HUD clearly shows this character progression. The HUD is very minimalist and slides on screen only when Hellboy is in the thick of combat.

I'll take that. The pause interface is also incomplete although I did notice a circular item wheel… What sort of systems are in place? Does Hellboy evolve in terms of abilities or do you move the gameplay along via items and gadgets?
John: The circular item wheel is for Hellboy's special arsenal of ammo, and is designed for easy access to magical rounds.
Hellboy's abilities evolve as you progress from chapter to chapter, unlocking items and special abilities. Some of our enemies are just too powerful, even for Hellboy, until you reach a certain level. Replay value is a big factor here. Fans will want to earn all of the achievements and unlocks, whilst the casual player will appreciate the array of moves already at your disposal.

In terms of items, the clever player will take full advantage of the highly destructible environments. The mighty Right Hand of Doom lets you craft ad hoc weapons to continue the mayhem.

When Hellboy gets weak his heart begins to pound and he needs to catch his breath. What causes the player to lose a life and how far back will it set Hellboy? Are you using a checkpoint system?
John: Hellboy is one tough dude, and it takes some pretty mighty opponents to best him; or persistence and sheer force of numbers. When Hellboy is defeated you restart at the nearest checkpoint and this system is so well tuned you'll never be too far away from the action.

Hellboy has a great jump. Does this mean we get some platforming?
John: Hellboy is extremely agile for a big guy, and I'm really happy with the way we've captured the classic comic book pose in the air. There's a little bit of platforming required when exploring, but nothing too onerous. I think we make best use of his airborne ability with some lethal aerial attacks: a brutal jumping ground smash attack and a touch of razzle dazzle with an impressive aerial grapple.

I don't think I've ever felt as engaged in terms of fighting/fisticuffs as I do playing this game. You really feel his power; in fact, it's the most visceral hand-to-hand combat I've experienced this side of God of War. Would you say that this was your main emphasis or will we find the adventuring aspects as compelling?

"We've strived to make combat and movement quintessentially Hellboy in feel – you run, jump, fall and crash through the world."

-Producer John Whiston

John: Thanks! We've strived to make combat and movement quintessentially Hellboy in feel – you run, jump, fall and crash through the world. At its core, Hellboy is a tactical brawler, and provides the player with a huge array of combat moves. There are over 20 distinct moves within the powerful unarmed combos, as well as a number of completely unique weapon combos. These can be used by taking advantage of any of the three classes of "impromptu" weapons that can be found within the world—either from disarmed opponents or ripped from the surrounding environment.
You will definitely find the adventuring aspects compelling—exploring the sinister world of Hellboy, replete with Nazis, Lovecraftian Demons and European folklore. Hidden ties are slowly revealed, leading you toward a final face-off with Hermann Von Klempt and his most awful creation. However, I'd say the main emphasis was some serious, hardcore face punching.

The environments are ultra complex, bathed in flora, assorted dwellings and realistic water—all picture perfect, yet you manage to apply collision to pretty much everything. I was shocked going through the village that I could jump up and shatter ledges and so forth. Are you pushing the envelope of what the 360 can do? Is this why the game has a limited Point of View? It's simply stunning.
John: Yes, we're definitely pushing the 360 with Hellboy, and its power allows us to accomplish many new things that were not possible on earlier consoles. Our environments are built as playgrounds for Hellboy's Right Hand of Doom. Anything that looks like it will break is fair game. From crumbling walls, trees and statues through to entire Japanese temples—Hellboy's world is highly destructible.
Our camera system is designed to best frame the action in each area, making use of pre-determined angles and paths. We subtly direct the player to various targets or paths, and the entire tone of an area can shift between exploration and combat, with a different angle, field of view and tracking behavior. We do let the player pivot the cinematic tracking camera at its position for a limited ability to look around—aiming with the Samaritan as you do so, just in case some added Faboom is required.

Bambini's come in small and extra large.

Talk to me about those derelict little demon hordes that seem to sprout up every step of the way... Who or what are they and how do they tie in to the big picture? They seem like the only enemies that reappear in every location...
John: These sadistic little demons are called Bambinis and they are the Witch's evil minions—a hellish fusion of bones and scraps of cloth, with crudely stitched skin. They are called upon to do her evil bidding, and give Hellboy a hard time in the process. When alone, the Bambini are cowardly, but get two or three together with a leader and they'll gleefully attack and try to overpower Hellboy. Some ride on mounts, using whips to attack, and then there is the Witch's ultimate twisted creation, the Bambini Giant. An aggressive abomination, concocted of Bambinis—the torso composed of a multitude of Bambini, stuffed inside and bandaged together with magic, mud and soiled rags.

Hell yeah. I love all the ways Hellboy can abuse them, especially popping off their heads to heave as projectiles. Can Hellboy perform similar grab moves with all of the games characters?
John: Heh... focus testing has certainly confirmed that players love ripping heads off enemies! I think Hellboy's grappling ability is his most exciting combat move set. Once you've grabbed an opponent you can slam, punch, head butt, throw and perform contextual finishing moves to defeat your foes. Hellboy has a unique way to finish each and every enemy type.

I had at the village boss—so cool—but I'm curious how big and bad they actually get... Any that you're particularly proud of? How many are there? Is there one massive behemoth at game's end—like a central "bad guy?"
John: Oh they get bigger and badder! I really can't give too much away, but every level keeps getting wilder. Hellboy is on the trail of a crazed Witch— and you stumble across some truly Lovecraftian nightmares on your journey! In terms of sheer scale there are two behemoths that I'm really proud of, plus four giant bosses who certainly hand it to HB on the way. Our hero isn't the only creature in this world who likes to smash enemies through solid stone. My personal favorite though is the end of game monster that I guarantee you won't forget in a hurry!

Entering the polishing stages where are your biggest challenges? What I noticed were shadow effects dropping in and out as the camera moved... Will you be able to apply shadows to so much vegetation and lock down the frame rate at 30 or more?
John: The polish stage is challenging but

"...it wasn't until the success of the movie that Konami got a hold of the license. I think at that point it was just a case of us begging them to let us make the game!"

-Creative director Steve Stamatiadis

really satisfying to see all of the great visuals and gameplay come together. I'm really happy to see all of our hard work over the past 18 months looking so sweet on screen. Lighting and shadows are key to our visuals and we're shadowing a phenomenal amount of vegetation while hitting a steady 30fps.

In the Japan level the brightness seems to be heavily cranked. How will the stage look after the final lighting and effects pass?

John: Japan is graphically stunning. It's a magical, mist-shrouded level that will take your breath away. Sunlight dapples through maple and cherry blossoms, leaves fall and fireflies drift around magic lanterns. You battle through Bamboo forests, lakes, waterfalls and dramatic vistas to reveal mystical temples.

What about cinemas? Are they in-engine, separate, or a mixture of both?

John: Our cutscenes are all done in-engine, and look fantastic. They convey all the mannerisms and sarcastic wit of our favorite blue-collar Demon hunter.

What about music? Is it continuous, adaptive... what can we expect?

John: The music is composed by Christopher Drake, who also scores the Hellboy animated series. His music captures the vibe of the game and follows the action perfectly, adding the right emotion for the onscreen events in ways that just weren't possible even a few years ago in videogames. I think the thing players will notice most about the score is how great it is when compared to many action games, and even big screen action epics. It's one of those scores that people will remember long after they've beaten the game.

Is Hellboy big in Australia?

John: Hellboy is HUGE in Australia, and there's a real anticipation for our game. It's a real honor to be working on such a well-loved property and the entire development team here at Krome (and production team at Konami) are massive Hellboy fans. We're very confident that fans will appreciate our new stories within the classic setting.

Bet on it.

"It's almost heartbreaking how much effort has been put into crafting lush gardens and lavishly decorated parlors that players will blow through in all of five seconds."

Castlevania The Dracula X Chronicles

A long-buried classic rises again

words Casey Loe

As much as I love the consistent quality of recent Castlevania titles, I miss the thrilling days of the 16-bit hardware transition, when Konami's top SNES, PC Engine and Genesis teams each took their own crack at the franchise. All three games were spectacular, and the variety of different approaches thoroughly revitalized the aging series. The western world never got an official release of Dracula X: Rondo of Blood (the PC Engine team's masterpiece), but Konami has picked a good time to right that wrong; Castlevania may still be going strong, but a little shot of variety is exactly what it needs right now.

The shift in tone is apparent immediately; both versions of Rondo begin with a brutal virgin sacrifice, but the cute anime cinemas of the original have been replaced with a beautifully rendered CG intro that is significantly more explicit. It takes Chronicles all of thirty seconds to earn a likely M-rating, and if that doesn't cleanse your palate of the Saturday-morning-cartoon aftertaste left by Portrait of Ruin's character design, Ayami Kojima's subtly disturbing cover art will surely finish the job.

It's just as jarring to fire up the game and see the old characters and monster sprites be swept away and replaced with bright, richly-textured 3D models. After all, the original Rondo of Blood had so much influence on the visual style of the series that the Castlevania team has been reusing its sprites for *fourteen years*. But the switch to 3D makes everything new again, and while the monsters are mostly Castlevania classics, we're seeing beautiful new twists on each for the first time in ages.

The switch to 3D graphics is bound to be controversial, but the early stages of the remake are looking gorgeous. The original Rondo broke the conventions of the series by offering several daylit outdoor stages, and those have now been re-rendered with dozens of background layers and a rainbow of bright colors rarely seen in the series. Even the interiors are brightly lit by Castlevania standards, illuminating high-res textures that have been skillfully weathered to create that Dracula's-Castle feeling of crumbling opulence. This can't have been an easy remake for the art team; frenetic level design is one of Rondo's quirks, and a typical stage features at least a half-dozen different environments of varying lengths. It's almost heartbreaking how much effort

has been put into crafting lush gardens and lavishly decorated parlors that players will blow through in all of five seconds.

Rondo was one of the first games to have a truly great CD soundtrack, but its synthy hard rock feels a bit dated when compared to Michiru Yamane's recent symphonic scores. You can enjoy the original soundtrack in the emulated version of Rondo, but the remake features all new arranges of each of the classic tunes. The remixed compositions follow the originals closely, but each of the grinding lead guitars is now paired with a more delicate and Castlevaniaesque melody from a harpsichord, xylophone or cello. The overall effect remains very hard rock, but every now and then the relentless beats cease to give each track a few quiet moments with a harp or acoustic guitar. As much as I love the original version of the soundtrack, I have a feeling it's about to be replaced on my iPod.

While monumental effort has gone into updating Rondo's graphics and sounds, virtually every other aspect of the original has been preserved. Each stage has been recreated screen for screen, each enemy is right where it used to be, and each candle holds the same item it always has. For better or for worse, the PSP remake of Rondo of Blood looks to be one of the most faithful remakes in video game history.

Historically, Rondo of Blood is the missing link between the level-based Castlevanias of the NES era and the exploration-oriented "Metroidvania" titles of today. The game was broken up into distinct levels with bosses at the end, but within each level was a series of hidden paths that lead to alternate routes and even entire alternate levels. It was impossible to see all or even most of the game in a single play-through, and players were forced to explore thoroughly to find such treats as hidden levels and Maria, the unlockable second character. That aspect is hardly revolutionary today, but the simple genius of the game's level designs still shines through. Richter has no ability to level-up or stockpile healing items, so Rondo of Blood is a lot tougher than modern Castlevanias. You'll probably die more in Rondo than all the GBA and DS Castlevanias combined.

The fusion of modern artistry and classic game design is coming together beautifully, and it's stunning how little Rondo of Blood betrays its age. (Most noticeable is the lack of modern Castlevania moves—I can't tell you how often I've tried to slide or twirl my whip, only to realize that such moves are but a distant dream for young Richter.) Could Rondo of Blood really have been so far ahead of its time that its screen-by-screen remake is still capable of wowing Castlevania fans fourteen years later? We'll find out when the Dracula X Chronicles ships in September.

Castlevania: Dracula X Chronicles

System(s)	PSP
Developer	Konami
Publisher	Konami
Available	September

IGA

Producer, Castlevania: The Dracula X Chronicles

"I had often been told people wanted a Castlevania on PSP, long before this project began."

Questions by Casey Loe, Nick Des Barres and Dai Kohama
Translated by Nick Des Barres

play: I know you have great affection for the original PC Engine Dracula X: Rondo of Blood, and you've talked about letting Western fans have the chance to play it for a long time. Why now, and why PSP?
Koji Igarashi: I had often been told people wanted a Castlevania on PSP, long before this project began. The traditional Castlevania user base is somewhat older and more mature, so within the company it had often been suggested PSP might be a better idea than DS. When work began on the PSP version, we realized drawing pixel art at that resolution would be very difficult, and I knew the desire for a 3-D Castlevania with 2-D gameplay was there. Since that approach would be technically possible on PSP, I thought the timing was finally right for Rondo of Blood.

Tell us a little more about the decision to go with polygonal graphics instead of hand-drawn, while retaining the 2-D gameplay. That's a pretty giant step for the series.
When you think about it, pixel art is a technique that was born from low-resolution displays. When you get into modern, high resolutions, it stops being art made from a collection of pixels and starts being single drawings. If you're working in low resolution, an animation of, say, three frames will look fine. In high resolution the same three frames wouldn't be enough–it would look jerky and unrealistic. In terms of both time and expense, polygons were the only realistic way to achieve the look we wanted. We had already had a lot of requests for a 3-D look in our 2-D games, and obviously with 3-D you have more freedom for presentation. So, thinking it would be interesting to try a 2-D game with 3-D presentation, we came to the decision to go with polygons.

Was there anything particularly difficult to recreate from the hand-drawn original in polygons?
Well...there was one thing that was so difficult it was changed entirely. In the original, Maria has a long skirt that flutters. We couldn't make it do that in 3-D, so we redesigned her character from scratch. Don't worry, she's still really cute! [laughs]

Did adapting totally 2-D gameplay in a 3-D world present a technical challenge?
When I saw the final look, with its layered depth and sense of space, I was pretty happy...but there was one big problem. In games after Symphony of the Night you collide with the ceilings when you jump, right? Well, in Rondo you passed right through them. This wasn't a problem in a totally 2-D space, where you would simply have the sprite pass over the ceiling tile. In 3-D, however, we had Richter's head disappearing into blocks and just the tip of it popping out of the top, it looked so lame [laughs]. Fixing this was actually incredibly difficult from a technical perspective. Like I said before, we had wanted to do a 2-D game in 3-D space for a while, but this particular problem really gave me cold feet. I was very pleased when we were able to find a way around it.

Wow. That's something I never would have even considered.
A lot of people got to play it at the recent Konami Gamer's Day, and I was wondering how many noticed Richter was properly passing over blocks as if the game were 2-D [laughs]. That's just the kind of thing I'm particular about.

Are any of the original Rondo of Blood staff involved with this remake?
They aren't. However, the original director for Rondo of Blood [Toru Hagihara] also directed Symphony of the Night, the game on which the Castlevania baton was passed to me. Even though the original staff aren't directly involved with this remake, I feel I understand their intentions and what sort of mindset the original game was made with.

Is this game being made by what fans think of as the "3-D Castlevania team"–the people behind Lament of Innocence and Curse of Darkness? We haven't heard from them in more than a year.
No, it's actually a completely different team.

Rondo of Blood seems to be a very faithful remake, but you've mentioned that an entire stage is being redesigned from scratch in previous interviews. Which stage is it, and why are you replacing it?
Ah yes, the redesigned stage. It's actually a stage you can only play through once you've beaten the game. Castlevania is known for its difficulty, right? When Rondo of Blood was originally made, it ended up being a lot easier than earlier games in the series. This frustrated some of the production staff, so they went off on their own and made an incredibly difficult stage, saying, "I'll show you Castlevania!" [laughs]. (Ed. note–as far as the staff of **play** knows, this bonus level didn't make it into the retail version of Dracula X.) It was made up of bits and pieces of other stages stitched together and would have been fine for a bonus, but since we were remaking the entire game anyway, we decided to recreate this stage as well. It's an all-new stage now...it didn't have a boss before, but it does now.

Are there any aspects of the original game you were tempted to change, but in the end decided to preserve?
I never intended to be completely faithful to the original. Since this type of linear action game doesn't get made much anymore, I tried to be respectful of the current state of games while remaking it. It's still a straightforward game, but also now a deeper one.

What about the difficulty? Is it based on the original, or has it been tweaked? One thing that always stood out about the original was how overpowered Maria was.
Well, the original version is also playable so you can compare easily. I always thought of Maria as an aid for people who aren't too good at action games, so she's pretty much as-is.

As much as we're looking forward to the game itself, newly-arranged Castlevania music is almost as exciting. Is the arrangement by longtime series standby Michiru Yamane?
Not this time. It's a different artist. Of course, Symphony of the Night is also included on the disc, so you can get your fill of the Yamane sound there. For Rondo of Blood, we've used an artist new to the Castlevania series.

What was the concept for the new music arrangement?
I just asked them to make it cool and embellish the music without ruining its original feel. I said, "make it gorgeous!" I think it did turn out pretty gorgeous [laughs].

Something a lot of fans are happy about is the return of character designer Ayami Kojima to the series. Why the return to her more mature designs after two installments of the series that favored an anime look?
Well, the character designs for the original Rondo of Blood got a very mixed reception. You could say most of the opinions were not favorable. Since this game also contains Symphony of the Night, which Kojima designed and was very well received, I wanted to unify the aesthetic of the two games. I truly believe that even if the look changes, as long as we stay true to the Castlevania gameplay itself our core

Same staircase... added depth.

fans won't abandon us. I think that was the case with the DS games. However, the PSP owner tends to be a little older and thus probably more appreciative of Kojima's designs.

So it's mainly a question of target age groups.
To be honest I've been told by some younger people that they think Kojima's designs are a little scary [laughs]. I think adults can appreciate them, of course, but for younger DS users it can be a little off-putting.

Did you have any particular requests for the new character design, or did you largely leave it up to Miss Kojima?
For Richter, my only request was a younger version of his Symphony of the Night design. Maria was a little more difficult. As I said earlier, her long skirt would have been a problem, so I asked for pantaloons. That made her silhouette a little too thin, so we decided to lengthen her hair. Of course, long hair would have been just as hard to do in 3-D as a skirt, so it became a ponytail. We arrived at the final Maria design after a lot of discussion.

While on the topic of characters, did you have Miss Kojima design anyone new? Can we expect one of your traditional hidden characters?
This time it's hidden games rather than hidden characters. You have to search for, find, and unlock hidden games within the initially selectable titles.

The original Symphony of the Night is a masterpiece, but it has long been singled out as a classic example of bad English voice acting in video games. You've said

"For Richter, my only request was a younger version of his Symphony of the Night design."

Dracula X: Rondo of Blood

Having trouble believing that a 14-year old game was really this good? You won't have to go far to see for yourself, since the original PC Engine CD version of Rondo of Blood is right there on the UMD. This classic title features a then-state-of-the-art anime intro, a still-rocking original soundtrack, and graphics that are comparable to a good GBA game. You can play it at either its original resolution (which uses about half of the PSP's screen) or play a slightly blurry scaled-up version. Unfortunately, Rondo has caught the bug that afflicts virtually all PSP ports of 16-bit games: parallax backgrounds that darken dramatically whenever the screen scrolls. There's still hope that Konami might find a cure, but Sega couldn't when they released their recent Genesis Collection, so this might just be an insurmountable limitation of the PSP's crappy screen-refresh rate.

in the past you'd like an opportunity to re-do it. Has that chance finally arrived?
Yes. The script has been re-written, and all the voice newly recorded.

That's fantastic news. Many recent Japanese games in the West, even your own Portrait of Ruin, offer dual English/Japanese voice tracks for the hardcore fan. Will you be doing this in Dracula X Chronicles?
Yes, we're still thinking about exactly how to implement the language selection. [Ed. note–in Portrait of Ruin it was a code.]

Since this may be the last release Symphony of the Night ever sees, a lot of fans are clamoring for the inclusion of the Saturn version bonus features. [Ed. note–two extra stages of questionable quality with new enemies and items, and a playable Maria.] I know you didn't work on that version, but...
I understand why fans who've never played the Saturn version would be interested in those features, but I really, really don't feel good about them. I couldn't put my name on that stuff and present it to Castlevania fans.

After ten years, are there any aspects of the original Symphony you wanted to re-balance, or change in any way?
This isn't really a change per se, but...a few bugs were found [laughs]. We've fixed those.

This will be the first linear, stage-clear type Castlevania in more than a decade. If it does well, can we expect a return to this style of the gameplay for the series?
Gauging that is definitely one of the reasons why this game is being made.

Since we have you trapped here, I hope you'll let us take a look back at Portrait of Ruin and ask a few fannish questions. One of the big series mysteries regards the Belmont family's loss of the legendary whip, Vampire Killer. We finally saw a little bit of this story hinted at in Portrait... was Richter the last Belmont to wield it?
There's still a lot more to that story [laughs]. Yes, the last Belmont to own the Vampire Killer was Richter.

Can we expect to find out why the Belmonts lost use of the whip in future games?
Well, the plot is already done in my mind [laughs]. However, whether or not that story gets told depends on the future performance of the series.

The hidden Stella and Loretta gameplay using the touchpen in Portrait of Ruin was very popular. Was that a design experiment? Can we expect to see something similar in future DS Castlevanias?
That was really more of a situation with our character programmer going off and making something on his own [laughs]. He thought, "We have a touchscreen, might as well use it!" In the end it was an experiment with touchscreen-controlled action, yeah.

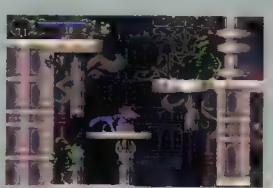
While we're on the topic of hidden characters, tell us about Axe Armor. He was playable in Symphony and Portrait, each game seems to introduce a new iteration of the enemy...what's the obsession?
I don't know, he's something about Castlevania that just really stands out because he's so annoying [laughs]. He's like Death or something. He's gotta be in there. When you think about Castlevania, you think about Axe Armor.

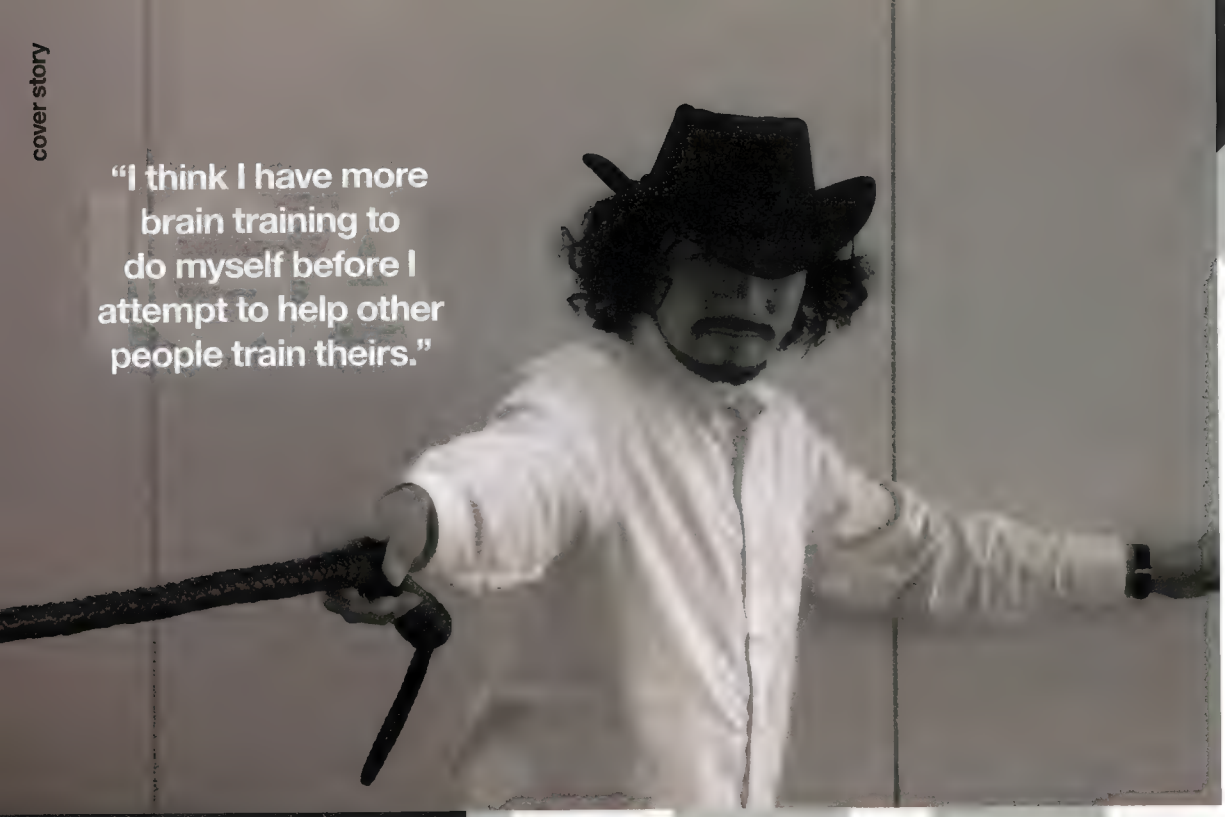
Looking back on the DS Castlevanias, do you think the anime-influenced character design was the right choice? Did it have the impact on sales you were hoping for?
This isn't speaking strictly of sales, but I think it half-succeeded and half-failed. I was proud of the animation, but the character design itself I'm not satisfied with. That was the part that didn't go so well. Even so, I've heard from people who said they picked the game up because of the anime look, so that would be the part that succeeded in

Classic Castlevania gameplay in 2.5D... Life is good.

Castlevania: Symphony of the Night

I imagine there's no shortage of people who would pay $40 for a portable version of this classic, but since Symphony is the direct sequel to Rondo, Konami is throwing it in for free. Producer Igarashi has promised that this version will feature newly recorded voice and rewritten text, fixing one of its few conspicuous flaws, but it should be otherwise identical to the PlayStation original. (Let's hope they find the time to replace that horrendous intro too.) When reduced to its original resolution, Symphony of the Night still looks great, and is mostly free of the aforementioned parallax-scrolling bug. Even a decade after its PlayStation release, Symphony is in most ways comparable in quality to the series' recent DS titles, and its soundtrack still ranks among the best game music ever recorded. If you haven't yet had the pleasure of playing Symphony of the Night, you'll likely find it to be just as compelling as the collection's main attraction. Heck, I just played Symphony on Xbox Live, but I *still* can't put the PSP version down.





"I think I have more brain training to do myself before I attempt to help other people train theirs."

my mind.

As a seasoned, well-respected creator of traditional action games, I'd like to ask your opinion on why Japanese gamers seem to be abandoning the genre. Castlevania continues to do very well in the West, but that's no longer so in Japan.
How I wish I knew the answer to that question [laughs]. Action gaming is becoming more and more niche in Japan. If you ask the average gamer in America or Europe what types of games they buy, action is always high on the list. Unfortunately it's never been very high on the list in Japan and it's only getting lower. I think one of the reasons is the fact that action games in Japan are perceived as being something too difficult for the average person. People look at them and think they'll be unable to play. Recently New Super Mario Bros. sold very well here, and I think it's probably because people looked at it and thought, "This looks like something I could do." It had that image, even if it was actually fairly difficult. Castlevania may be guilty of this, too, but the controls in action games are seen as too complex and difficult to keep up with. If an average person were to actually play one of these games I'm sure they'd be able to understand them, but that image of being a "difficult action game" is really unshakable. Even so, I think action games represent the genre you can have the most fun with in a short amount of time.

You recently gave a talk at the Game Developers Conference that ended with a powerful call to arms: "2-D Will Never Die." How was the response?
I know it got coverage here and there, so I'm sure there must have been some sort of response. Nothing I've heard directly, though. It's sort of like, "was anyone listening?" (laughs). I have had comments on my blog about it, so I think some people did take it to heart. There's nothing wrong with 3-D games, of course, but I think visuals are taking too much precedence both here and abroad. I have misgivings about that, and giving this talk made me realize there are a lot of people who feel the same way.

As an avowed lover of 2-D, what do you think about Atlus' Odin Sphere? Are you hoping it might expand the 2-D market?
Oh man, I'm really looking forward to that game! It gets higher and higher on the most-wanted lists in Japanese magazines every week. I've been thinking 2-D games were just getting more and more niche, but if Odin Sphere does well I might have to rethink that. New Mario Bros. also sold incredibly well, but it's Mario, isn't it? [laughs] The games we make are very different from Mario...it's really in its own genre. But I definitely have my eye on Odin Sphere. I'll be watching it very closely.

I'd be remiss if I didn't ask: Next-gen Castlevania. Can we expect an announcement soon?
I can't say anything yet. We're still deciding exactly what to do with it, but it is moving forward.

As always, we can't wait. Now, if you'll permit us...we know a great deal about IGA the game designer, but too little about IGA the man. Brain Training-style "non-games" are all the rage these days in Japan. If a higher-up at Konami asked you to make one, what do you think it would be about?
Huh...I think I have more brain training to do myself before I attempt to help other people train theirs [laughs]. I think those games are really nice and I have played them myself, but, how should I say this...I prefer games that go "crash!" and "bang!" [laughs]. If I was asked to make a Brain Training-type game I'd probably have to refuse. I don't know...if they insisted I might be able to come up with something [laughs].

You're one of the few Japanese game designers who are truly well-known overseas. Does that make your colleagues jealous?
Me? I think among my colleagues Akira Yamaoka [Silent Hill series producer/composer] is much more famous. I'm jealous of him!

You've been spotted at every game-related event held anywhere in the US for the last year. What do you do with all your frequent flier miles?
Now that you mention it, my miles really are piling up [laughs]! I went to Europe for the first time the year before last and was able to see the historical Dracula's castle in Romania, but I wish I had had more time to see castles in Germany and France, too. I didn't have much time so I visited cathedrals in Berlin and Dresden, but I do hope to get back to Europe to see more. It's a little strange that I make Castlevania and have barely been to Europe.

I'm a little disappointed you're wearing white today. I had a super-witty question lined up about your all-black wardrobe, but you gotta roll with the punches. Let me ask...what's the ratio of black to white in your closet?
Oh, this is the only white shirt I own! There's a bit of a funny story behind this shirt, actually. My hair and beard have been like this for years, right? Well, there are a couple members of the Castlevania team that are very, very particular about fashion. My style is actually greatly informed by their opinion. They told me, "You've sort of got that whole wild look going on with the hair and everything. Black isn't you. You need something brighter, and it has to have a collar." I took their advice and first wore this shirt at GDC. It seemed to go over well, so now I wear it for interviews [laughs]. But everything else I own is black.

I feel like I've gotten that much closer to understanding the mystery that is Koji Igarashi. Our time is running short, so if you have a few words for those eagerly awaiting Rondo of Blood, please share them with us.
I think most fans probably consider Symphony of the Night to be the biggest turning point in the history of the Castlevania franchise, but for me it was Rondo of Blood. It was the first game in which the controls were significantly changed, and in which the player character got much, much stronger than previous heroes. It was the first game with cutscenes and a cinematic presentation, and it cut down on "bottomless pit" deaths a great deal. I would love for Western fans to finally have the chance to experience this major turning point in the series, and I think we've really done a good job enhancing the visuals and bringing out the PSP's strengths on this title. Please do witness this monumental entry in the Castlevania series for yourself.

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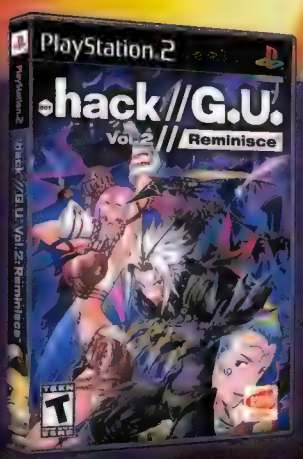

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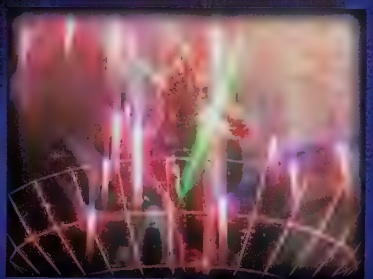

EPIC, ORIGINAL STORYLINE

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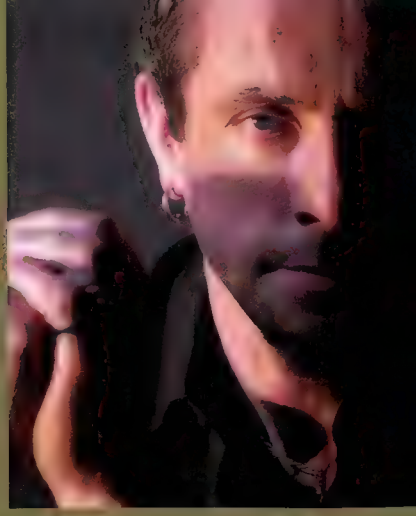
Clive Barker's Jericho

A bloodbath for the ages

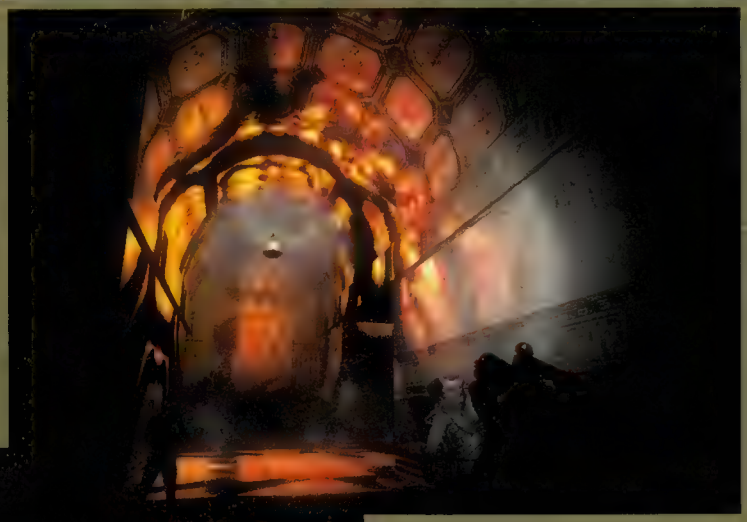


In the horror genre, a decent creator can get by with one very successful main character, however a great creator never ceases to bring new characters to life, tirelessly conceiving the next thrill. Clive Barker is acknowledged as one of the greats, having unleashed unforgettable horror entities like *Candyman* (go on, look in the mirror and say it five times) and *Hellraiser*'s Pinhead, the latter likely scheduled for termination this fall in Barker's Scarlet Gospels novel. In addition to two decades of book and film horror, Clive is no stranger to games, helping to shape DreamWorks' 2001 first-person classic, Undying. After the recent hiccups he experienced with much-maligned Majesco, Clive Barker has surfaced on the gaming scene again with Jericho, Codemasters' rather awesome looking multi-platform first-person shooter.

"In a Codemasters line-up dominated by Neon and Unreal Engine 3-powered titles, Jericho's technology seems every bit as powerful."

Let's take a moment to dissect the creative tendons beneath Jericho's FPS might. Alchemic Productions, a sort of one-stop project coordinator, facilitated the early connections between Clive Barker and Codemasters, pipelining with developer Mercury Steam to create a theme, a world, and a strong narrative. If that developer rings a bell, it should. Mercury Steam produced the underrated robot adventure Scrapland. We knew they had a bright future ahead of them. Clive really hit it off with this team, and together they developed the Jericho squad, their powers and their personalities. "Especially the script; Clive was really keen to make that shine. What you're not seeing in early demos is the amount of story-based stuff we're doing between the characters," explains Andrew Wafer, brand manager on Jericho at Codemasters.

Jericho is a seven-man special forces team [illegible] tional technology and arcane powers. They're part of a top secret US military unit called The Department of Occult Warfare and they've been sent to the cursed city of Al Khali where paranormal activity has been detected at an archeological dig. A large dimensional rift has opened in the city's core and concentric temporal layers now spread out from the epicenter like a Russian doll, each shell containing a different time period in the temple's turbulent history. The Jericho squad will encounter ghastly opponents raised from history—crusaders, soldiers and cabalists that occupied Al Khali in ages past, everyone from Romans and Sumerians to the Third Reich. You'll also be racing against a highly-trained and well-financed cult, whose leader, Arnold Leach, has discovered a way to release some foul ancient evil that would most assuredly cause distress—and perhaps eternal



Not for the faint of heart.

enslavement—for all.

You play Jericho squad leader Captain Devon Ross, a "ghost" soldier capable of psychically linking to his team and augmenting their powers. Delgado is the heavy gunner and pyromancer. He stores a companion fire spirit in a containment unit attached to what remains of his right arm. Cpl. Cole is the resident hacker, gifted with incredible intelligence and a gesture-based onboard interface that lets her slow or speed up time and create "anchors" (save points) in time space. Abigail Black is the telekinetic sniper, able to guide her own shots mid-flight and redirect incoming projectiles. Jones is the seer, catching bits and pieces of events from the past and future and also spotting vestigial emanations that others cannot see. Father Rawlings is the exorcist, a battle priest with tours in Vietnam and Iraq to his credit and an encyclopedic knowledge of otherworldly entities. Billie Church is the stealthy minx, eviscerating foes up close with her samurai sword. Through ritual self-mutilation with her dagger, she can also draw powerful wards and enchantments. As Captain Ross you are free to hop into each squad member on a whim, leaving contextual orders for the remaining squad AI to follow.

Accessing the firepower, clairvoyance, alchemy, exorcism and blood magic of the squad obviously provides a great deal of variety in gameplay, and Mercury Steam has concocted levels and events that demand each soldier's strength. The squad also has various secondary abilities, like Billie's wall scaling, Delgado's heavy object lifting and Abigail's telekinetic push. You can also temporarily spike one squad member's powers with another's by using Ross' spirit threading abilities. For example, imagine taking the pyromancer's fire spirit and mixing it with the telekinetic's shockwave...suddenly you have supernatural napalm. As we witnessed, some enemies will eventually explode after being flambéed, the resulting detonation: a fleshy stew of combusted gore. Jericho's shooting action will be spiced-up with brief God of War-style button tapping sequences, mini cutscene-like scenarios where you'll squirm away from harpy talons or quick-step down a rocky shaft.

The multi-era Al Khali has become a haunt for the depraved unliving, stretching from modern times to WW2, through Crusades-period Arabia, to the height of the Roman empire and finally *way* back, to fourth millennium BC. Every faction that claimed the city throughout the ages has met with a grisly end. The developers have done a fine job capturing different eras. We witnessed combat in an ancient biblical epoch at the Tower of Babel and spotted a gleaming castle nearby. This castle was mere rubble earlier in the game, in a future age. We experienced Jericho on Xbox 360 and PS3 and Mercury Steam's proprietary engine looked great on both platforms.

In a Codemasters line-up dominated by Neon and Unreal Engine 3-powered titles, Jericho's technology seems every bit as powerful. The game's masterful choice of palettes (another area guided by Barker), really impressive texture design and heavy atmosphere did not disappoint.

The screens in this preview showcase some of Jericho's excellent spectral creatures and environments, but they do little to convey the game's visceral combat. The use of perspective is very intense. Billie's samurai sword rises and rushes forward like a giant meat cleaver. Decrepit enemies are often oozing blood before you even strike them, and driving (literally) one of Abigail's telekinetic sniper bullets through the cranium of three crusaders in a row—pop, pop, pop—ends in a shower of brain matter, three decapitated sacks of flesh squelching to the ground a second later. High quality weapon sound effects compliment the action, guiding angry rounds of hot lead from Delgado's chain gun, and the brief squad chatter we heard seemed well-voiced. A stirring soundtrack of orchestral stabs and sweeping horns—vaguely reminiscent of *Predator*'s score, with a hint of *Gladiator*—coiled around frenetic, rumbling drums and atmospheric synths.

Codemasters is aiming for a 15-hour campaign sprinkled with collectible extras (achievements and artwork) to encourage replay. Jericho seems to have a lot going for it. It's probably going to look and sound cutting-edge when it releases this fall on 360, PS3 and PC, and this will please FPS diehards, who are generally very tech-conscious. Barker's involvement has resulted in very strong characters and a cool synergistic squad system that essentially gives the player 7 archetypes at any time, including a main character and priest that can resurrect fallen squad members. Jericho could be the epic action horror that Clive Barker has had in his crosshairs for years.

Clive Barker's Jericho

System(s)	PS3/Xbox 360/PC
Developer	Mercury Steam
Publisher	Codemasters
Available	October

NiGHTS Journey of Dreams

In the night, dream delight

words Casey Loe

Sega purple is finally back in action.

"I'm hoping for a radical reimagining of the game's play mechanics, but even a straight sequel would stand out as the highlight of the Wii's third-party release schedule."

Rumors of a NiGHTS: Into Dreams sequel have been circulating ever since the original became a cult hit on the Saturn, but it's taken 11 years and the Wii's motion-sensing controller to finally make it a reality. NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams will be hitting the Wii by the end of this year, and while information has begun to trickle out, the big question is as yet unanswered: Will it use the Wiimote to offer a true 3D flight experience, or will the flying parts remain on rails?

NiGHTS creators Yuji Naka and Naoto Oshima have long since flown the coop, but Sega has managed to reunite a dream team of original developers headed by lead designer Takashi Iizuka. Backing him up are the art director and music director from NiGHTS: Into Dreams, both of whom did a spectacular job on the original. In interviews, Iizaki has hinted at a variety of game mechanics, including masks that allow Nights to gain the form and abilities of a dragon, dolphin, or rocket. His team has also dug deep into the Wii's feature set, and is promising a two-player mode, online connectivity (possibly related to the series' A-LIFE system?) and real-time weather changes based on the Forecast Channel.

Journey of Dreams will again feature a total of seven stages, including the ones shown here (which seem to be a reprise of the original's Splash Garden stage) and one with "glass-formed cliffs that overlook a castle of mirrors." The dopey child stars of Into Dreams are set to return, but no word yet on whether they'll still be in their teens, or if we'll be encountering Elliot and Claris as adults meeting in rehab after their pro-ball and acting dreams were respectively shattered.

I'm hoping for a radical reimagining of the game's play mechanics, but even a straight sequel would stand out as the highlight of the Wii's third-party release schedule. The marriage of Wiimote and NiGHTS sounds like a dream come true.

NiGHTS: Journey of Dreams preview

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Sega Studios USA
Publisher	Sega of America
Available	Fall

Dungeon Maker
Hunting Ground

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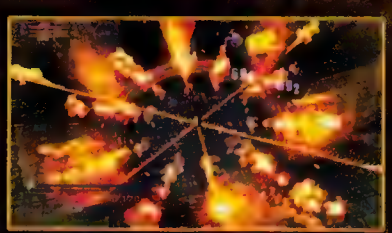

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PSP PlayStation Portable

Project Sylpheed

Deep space fine

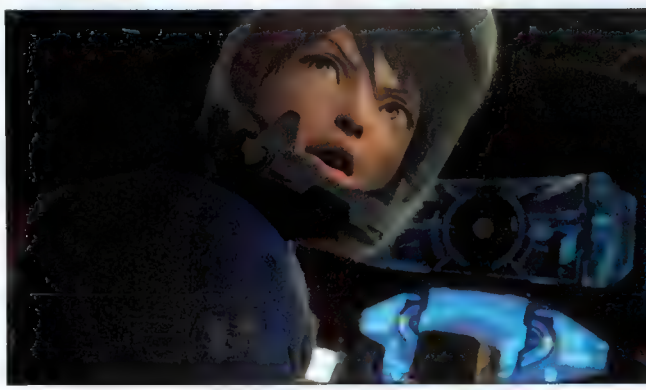
words Dave Halverson

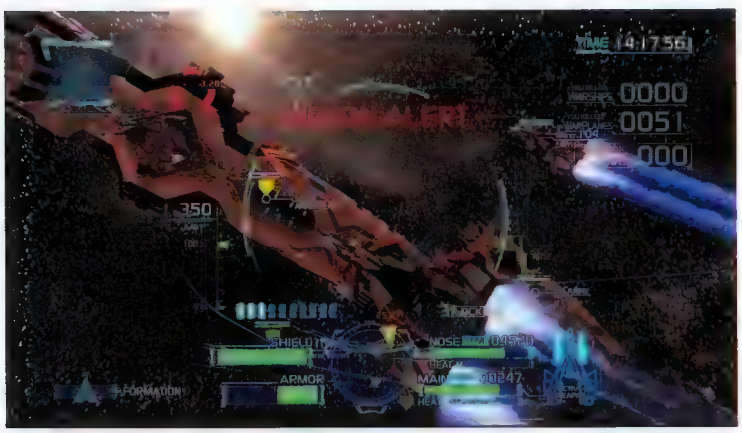
I've been trying to imagine what a 3D shooter on 360 or PS3 might look like since the changing of the guard, but the last thing I expected was an off-the-rails Silpheed sequel…but I'll take it! Given the power of the 360 and familiarity of rail shooters, the open sortie structure is actually a welcome twist given what GameArts and Seta are bringing to the table. As with Silpheeds past, slick CGI bookends much of the action, only this time out there's a cohesive, character-rich story and a base/mother ship complete with hangars to stock new ships and perform various modifications. Once in flight Sylpheed is much like Colony Wars or many a Star Wars game where you're embroiled in assorted campaigns ranging from swarming dog fights to protection and escort missions, firing your main weapon or launching missiles via a Panzer Dragoon-like multi-lock-on system as you attempt to destroy multiple targets while shaking any bogies off your tail. The difference here, besides the lovely HD look of it all, is a heretofore unseen level of intensity brought on by the multitude of action going on around you. At times the screen is so covered in luminescent effects, ships and explosions that it's all you can do to keep your eye on your immediate target, highlighted by bright orange brackets.

The game is absolutely thrilling to behold, even though you never really get to see the ships you're nuking up close (best to pick them off from afar). Thankfully there's enough going on elsewhere to more than compensate. There's also some clever AI at work amidst the stars. When tailing smarter enemies they like to lead you right for any nearby armadas and then pull up or maneuver just in time, attempting to plow you into your own vessel.

I've only nicked the surface of the entire game, but after a handful of missions I'm counting the days until the final version arrives. I feared that shooters had gone the way of the intergalactic Dodo… Now I can go back to only worrying about platformers.

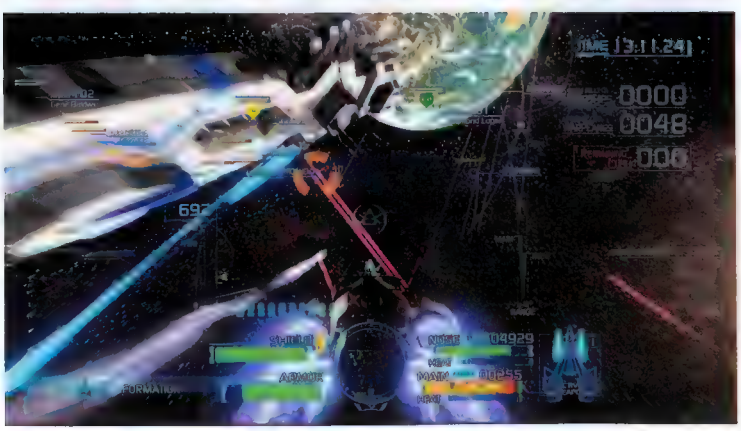
"At times the screen is so covered in luminescent effects, ships and explosions that it's all you can do to keep your eye on your immediate target"

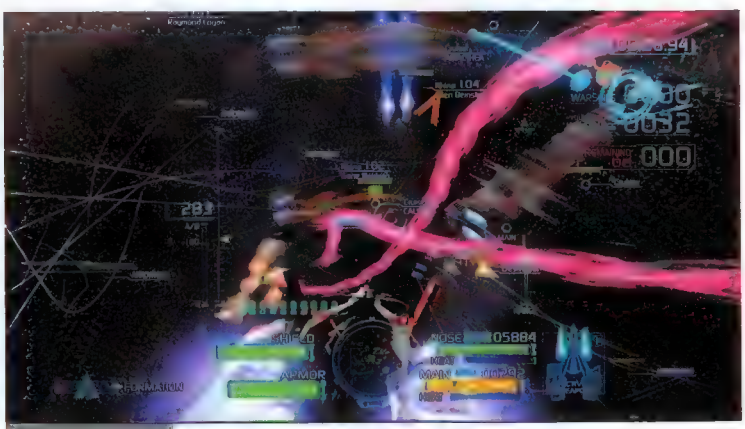




Camera views are easily toggled for maximum effect

Project Sylpheed	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	GameArts/Seta
Publisher	Microsoft Game Studios
Available	July 7





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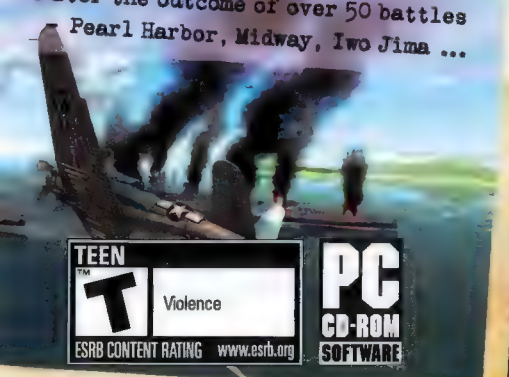

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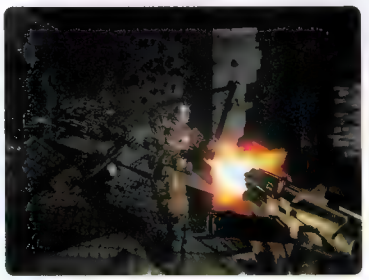
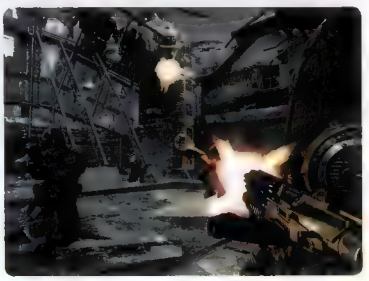
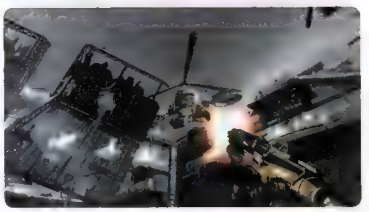
TimeShift

The times, they are a changing...







"The new TimeShift simply looks as if it belongs on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3."

TimeShift's ride through the 21st century has not been a smooth one. The oft-hyped, oft-seen first-person shooter began rattling its cage as an Xbox title back in 2003. It was originally to be published by Atari, but Atari was as fiscally sound as a Nigerian bank transfer. The title was sold off to Vivendi-Universal Games, which then passed the title off to its publishing subsidiary, Sierra.

Before Sierra got its hands on the game, though, Atari moved TimeShift from Xbox to Xbox 360. The resultant shift, pardon the pun, was disastrous. The title looked like a next-generation turd, something that had clearly and shoddily been ported over to the 360 with minimal effort and less skill.

The game emerged in 2006, in a near-final state. It was, essentially, an exercise in gameplay cheat features; players commanded a muscle-bound nudnik who could access a series of temporal powers to stop time, slow it, or reverse it while simultaneously remaining free to operate independently of the distortions he created. Using these time powers, he could pull off rather cool feats: stopping time to yank a gun out of a foe's hand; reversing time in order to send a rocket back to its source where it could then be shot and exploded to kill the person fired it; and so forth.

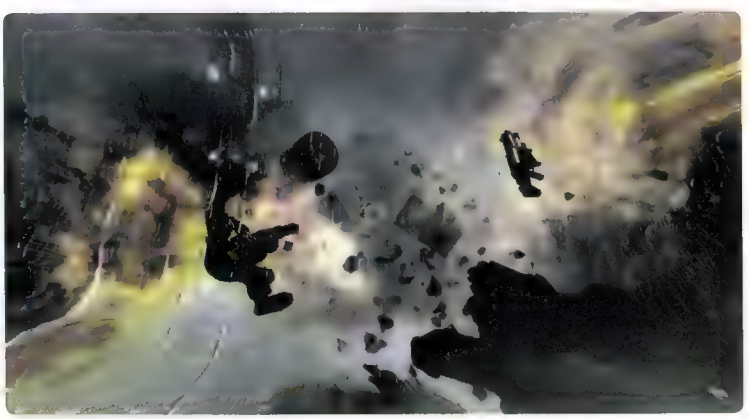
This was not the version of TimeShift that will see release. As the game neared completion, a momentous decision was made: TimeShift would have another year of development. The developers would have time to bring the game—properly bring it, mind you—to the next generation.

Forget about stuff like beaded and glistening rain that drips down the protagonist's visor, or glass that can be shattered in pieces (procedural destruction, as it's called). The new TimeShift simply looks as if it belongs on the Xbox 360 and PlayStation 3. Gone is the ridiculous he-man protagonist, too. He's been replaced by an anonymous character in a suit, one whose face is covered, and whose identity remains nebulous simply because he could be anyone.

Substantial gameplay alterations have been made to complement TimeShift's cosmetic improvements. The most noticeable is the elimination of the three-button time control scheme. Now, TimeShift utilizes one button to alter time, and the game's artificial intelligence decides which effect is used. In any given situation, when the player activates the temporal controls, the A.I. will seek to find the most elegant solution to a problem, say, choosing to reverse time if a launched rocket is near the character or opting to stop time when a rocket has just been launched. It's not certain whether this was done because, as Sierra asserts, players were only using the stop-time feature, or because it was simply too unwieldy to give anyone full and unrestricted access to the game's time powers.

TimeShift's tale is rapidly nearing its conclusion. Sierra is claiming the game has seen its last delay and will release sometime in the fall.

TimeShift	
System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Saber Interactive
Publisher	Sierra
Online/Multi	TBD
Available	October



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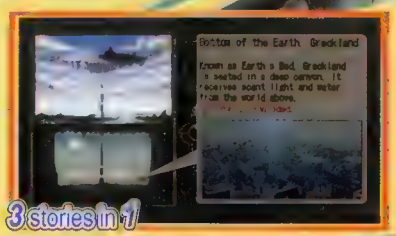

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Vampire Rain

Slaying in the rain

Freak, not on a leash.

In an effort to shed their fur-coated skin (I miss you Blinx) while birthing their very own real-world thriller extraordinaire, Artoon have combined elements of some of the past two decades most successful franchises—Metal Gear Solid, Splinter Cell, and Resident Evil—to home brew their own brand of action-stealth franchise.

The setting for this tightly scripted thriller is a vacant city (well, almost: a few seemingly brain-dead humans have chosen to stand in the rain and look stupid) overrun with Nightwalkers—humans infected with a viral strain that causes them to rot on cue and mangle non-carriers like human chew toys, one of which is you, as part of a tactical team sent into exterminate them. The kick is that they're so powerful that once spotted your chances of survival are nil, so stealth is key, unless the game's tightly woven parameters decide otherwise.

Thankfully stealth is what Vampire Rain does best. The bulk of the gameplay has you (and I kind following the Captain's orders, moving from point A to point B without becoming a Happy Meal, while moving in on each area's prime walker. The first prime walker battle (vs. a Steve Austin look-alike with a Mike Tyson tattoo) is pretty pathetic—a dopier boss pattern you simply will not find—but thankfully, they get better. A deeper story lurks behind the screams but that's best left for future vampire hunters.

To mix things up, on cover missions you're given a sniper rifle capable of taking down walkers with one shot from afar, and in the event you're indoors or underground a shotgun is made available for messy one-shot kills. Things really get dicey when you're sent in for some up close and personal recon via UV knives, which disintegrate the infected on contact. One might argue that having all these cool weapons spoon fed to the player limits the experience, but I can see where it's necessary to make a game of it. I mean, in the real world they'd let you keep the sniper rifle and load up with as many UV knives as needed, but where would the fun in that be? Familiarity isn't Vampire Rain's problem.

"Artoon's rain-soaked metropolitan mazes are simply picture perfect. This is a gorgeous game."

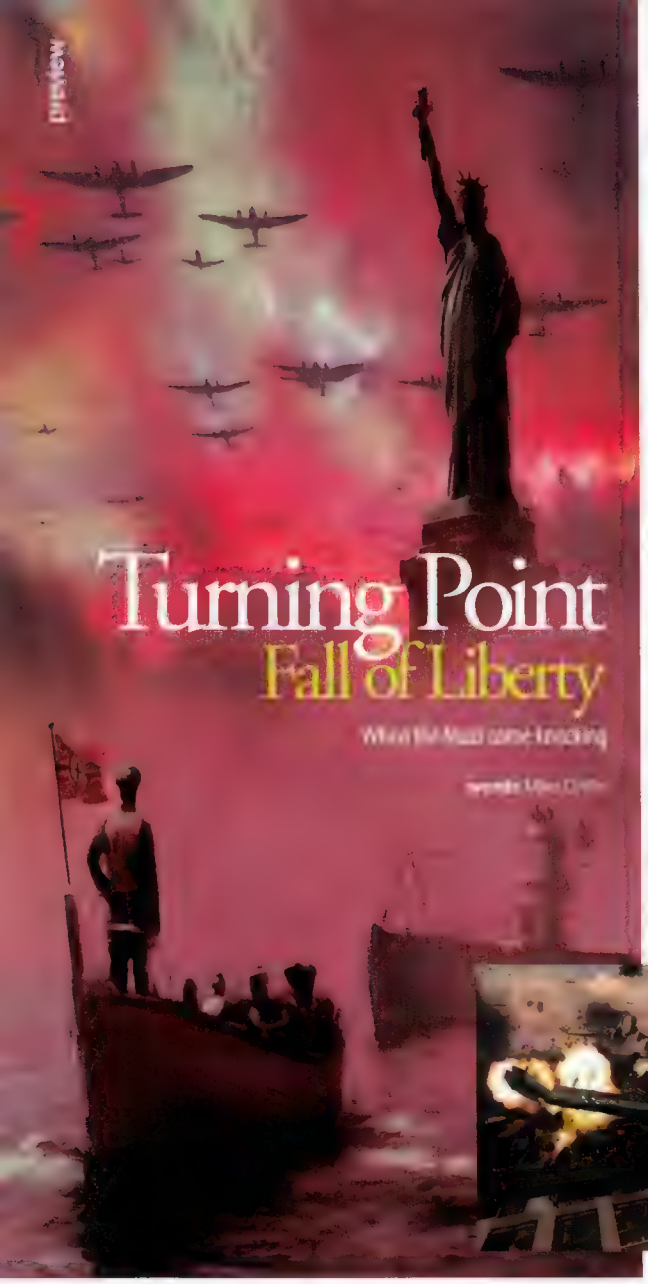
The Bellamy M3 is a one-hit wonder.

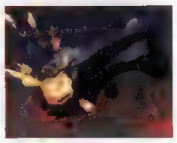
The problem is that monsters are stupid...

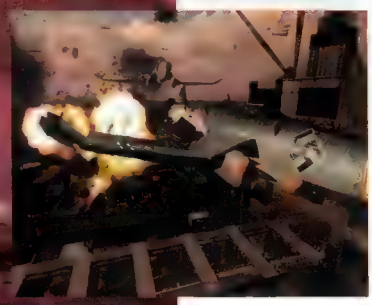
For one thing they all smoke, which wouldn't seem out of place if 99% of the game didn't take place in the pouring rain (masking the human scent). Surely their butts would be extinguished. They also say really stupid things. Appearing as mere humans until they spot a fleshy, the various carriers ramble on about sheer nonsense (such as the TV weather) and feel the need to repeat themselves verbatim every 15 seconds or so. That's the problem with plausible environments, storylines, and characters—now I want plausible AI. With any luck the script will be addressed before the game ships but it's more likely that any ADR sessions are long gone. The real question is whether or not such trifles will matter given the game's piece de resistance. Artoon's rain-soaked metropolitan mazes are simply picture perfect. This is a gorgeous game. The way the rain pelts every surface in the game is super cool, and as you get deeper into the assault, urban sprawls, construction sites, underground labyrinths and various industrial complexes are so photo real that you probably wouldn't care if the walkers burst into an impromptu show tune. The game's gadgets aren't too shabby either... especially in the taught latter stages. Love it or hate it, Vampire Rain also possesses that campy Japanese flavor found in the old Resident Evil games—the by-product of Japanese producers translating American action flicks in a way that almost always accidentally borders on parody. Applied to a lesser game such banter can be annoying, but in Rain's case it only ads to its charm and glistening polish.

Vampire Rain preview

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Artoon
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	8-player
Available	July 3







The wondrous power of art allows us to re-write history, if only briefly, and manifest mock realities both joyous and dreadful. In Turning Point: Fall of Liberty, Codemasters' forthcoming alternate history shooter for next-gen consoles and PC, the timeline is 1953 and World War 2 has been ongoing for a decade, its clear victors: Nazi Germany. Europe is completely occupied, Russia has fallen and almost all of Asia is under Nazi regime. There's still a tenuous alliance with Japan. "That may be something we'd do in a sequel, where the Germans turn on the Japanese, as they obviously would at some point," Lead Designer Robert Berger of Spark Unlimited (Call of Duty: Finest Hour) hints as we're introduced to the storyline. In this Turning Point, however, the Nazi war machine has rotated its turret towards America.

The game begins with a grand sense of terror as you flee the invasion. The tableau is absolutely intense, exquisitely scripted and powerfully rendered via the Unreal Engine 3. Nazi paratroopers blot the skyline like a hailstorm. Advanced Nazi war blimps (based on actual WW2 prototype blueprints) drift hundreds of feet overhead, floating down avenues and past the Empire State Building like boats in port. Meanwhile, waterborne battleships pound the city with ordnance from offshore and aircraft dive bomb the metropolis in great spectacles of shattered architecture and thick smoke. You're just an average construction worker, a native New Yorker running for your life as your hometown suddenly crumbles around you. Pairing your knowledge of the city with primal desperation, it's time to escape.

We asked Robert about the everyman guise of the main character. "We went with a guy that looks like a younger, hipper guy…a little rockabilly. Still feels 50s, but not in a kitschy way. A cool 50s character you'd wanna be." You run into other civilians early on who are attempting to regroup and form a ragtag resistance: "Basically anyone who had the balls to grab a gun, get organized and barricaded," according to Robert. For the National Guard soldier you encounter, it's all about defending home turf. The odds are nonetheless overwhelmingly in the Nazi's favor; very little of the US military remains intact. In this alternate history, the US didn't have to build up a huge armament for WW2 participation, thus leaving the nation highly vulnerable to the Nazi assault.

"The goal with this game was always the 80/20 rule: 80% of things you're familiar with, 20% things that are new and different. We wanted a little fantasy element to affect the gameplay and navigation, but really still make it feel grounded in World War 2. One thing we're trying to do is have similar historical arcs but in a different context. We don't have any Nazi mechs or anything. It still has that resonance of the WW2 era." However, you will spot many plausible weapon designs that could have evolved over the course of a prolonged WW2. Gear like the MP 50 gun, rocket launchers with radio-controlled projectiles, and super tanks. "We also have infrared, which was actually in its early stages in the 50s," the designer enlightens. It's an ideal technology for goggles and sniper scopes.

When the game moves to Washington DC later on, players will find Nazis equipped more like riot police, not invaders. DC has become a controlled state. "We're trying to give it a different feel in DC, that now it's an occupation, not so much a war, and you're more of an urban guerilla fighter," Robert explains. The game is, in fact, entirely urban. Won't WW2 shooters fans miss their usual dose of the French countryside? "I think it's interesting…they do some urban stuff in those games, like Berlin levels, but it's mostly rubble. The DC in our game is mostly intact. New York gets hit hard first while DC kind of folds quickly and peacefully as they put this puppet government in place. Every time I play DC, and I've played hundreds of other games…" Robert pauses for a moment, seemingly caught in a flashback. "In DC, you fight all the way up to the White House and I've never experienced anything like it." The resistance doesn't accept this puppet president, but they have no idea how bad the pact really is. The Nazis intend to test the world's first nuclear bomb on US soil and the faux pres is just sitting back. That's very bad news indeed.

Spark has an Edward R. Murrow-type character that has becomes a voice for the resistance, speaking out against the dummy president much the same way that Murrow challenged Senator McCarthy in the 1950s. He's one of the key elements tying the story together, conveyed via TV broadcasts peppered throughout levels. "We'll have the pres giving this speech about being a unified nation, and our Murrow will be there contradicting his speech," Robert comments. There's obviously a darker side to Nazi history too, one that's not exactly video game material. "We wanted to hint at some things…but to openly call something a gas chamber, no, we don't. It's understandably sensitive. It's such an understood piece of history. So when someone says the Nazis are re-tooling a factory for unknown purposes, you kind of know what they're doing, you get that ominous sense of evil, without going there. It's still a game; you don't need to see a pile of bodies to know what the Nazis were all about."

One of Turning Point's more surprising gameplay facets is its incorporation of third-person enemy and environment interactions. The desperate feel of the game is successfully evoked through a melee grappling system that lets you wrestle-away weapons and grenades from enemies before putting them down. "You can even do stuff like spin a guy around and use him as a human shield," Robert comments.

This team has worked on both the Medal of Honor and Call of Duty series, so they know all about precise, cinematic, ultra-scripted campaigns and uncompromising production. Expect Turning Point: Fall of Liberty to provide 8 to 10 hours of roller coaster-like focus stacked with thrilling set-piece battles. The game will also feature extensive multiplayer support, details of which (besides Nazis vs. good guys) are still under wraps. All told, those who enjoy intense WW2-themed action games should be thrilled by the potential of Turning Point.

"Advanced Nazi war blimps drift hundreds of feet overhead, floating down avenues and past the Empire State Building like boats in port."

~ Robert Berger,
Lead Designer – Spark Unlimited

Turning Point Fall of Liberty	
System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Developer	Spark Unlimited
Publisher	Codemasters
Online/Multi	Yes
Available	Q4

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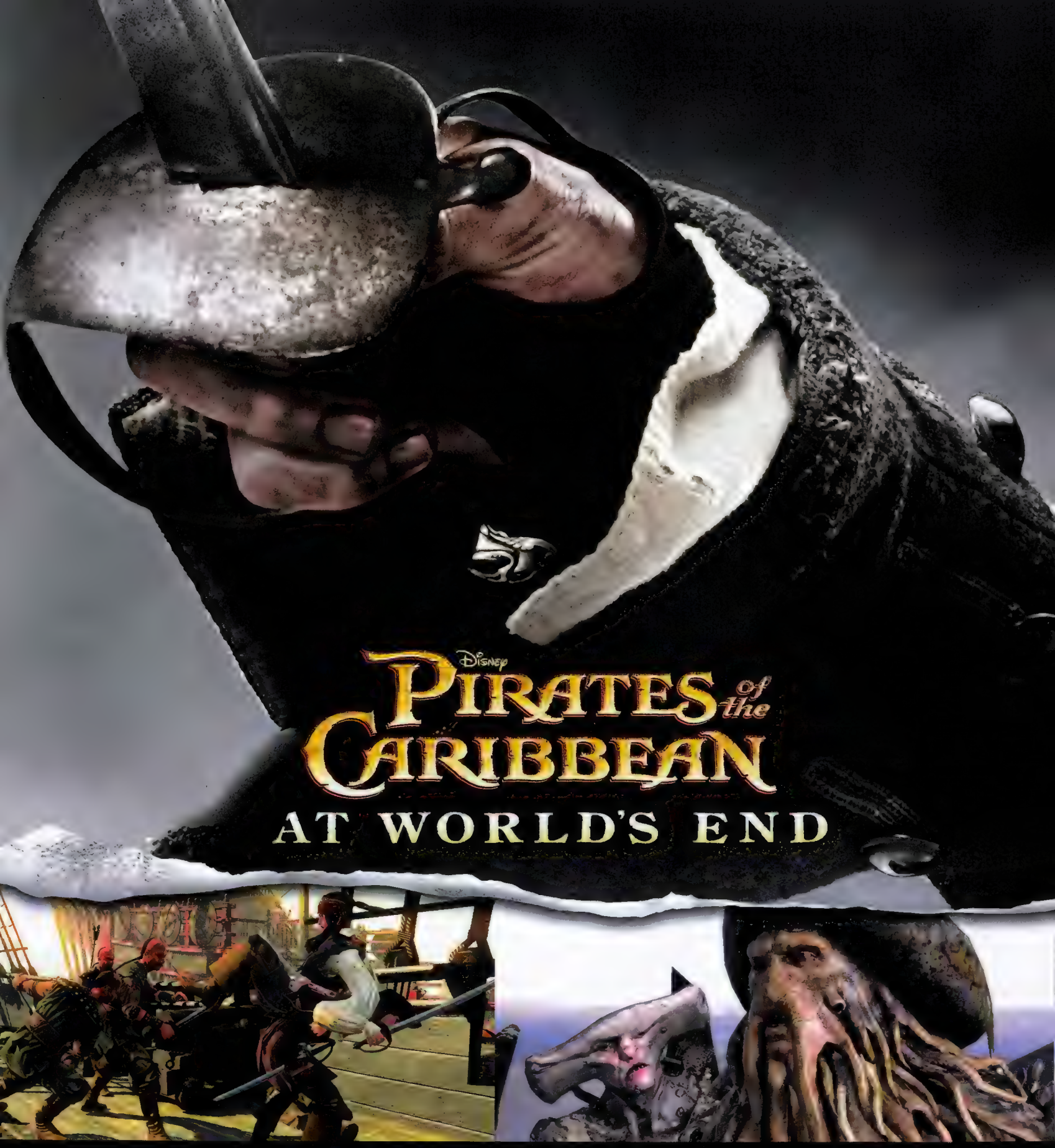

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LAIR

Learning to fly...

words Greg Orlando

"It's not about compromise," Julian Eggebrecht says about Lair. "It's not about the lowest common denominator."

The behemoth known as Lair has emerged from hiding. Still in its alpha stage of development, the game is pretty enough to show to an audience of magazine and Web site writers. It's not at that fabled 30 frames per second just yet, and Sony representatives are on hand to apologize when the game not-so-unexpectedly crashes, but Eggebrecht, the president of Factor Five, is clearly proud of his fledgling juggernaut.

Lair is a departure of sorts for Factor Five. The game still offers the flight combat Factor Five has built quite a reputation on, but this time the subject matter concerns itself with dragons and not X-Wings and TIE-Fighters. Factor Five has dismissed the Rogue Squadron in favor of something a little more...organic. And hot. It's no wonder the emphasis has been placed on getting everything in Lair, be it the sweeping story, the gorgeous game world, or the gameplay itself done perfectly, and without any hint of compromise in the process.

War is brewing, and it's a player's job to take to the skies as part of a dragon-based air force. In the air, the game utilizes the PlayStation 3's motion sensitive controls; titling the Sixaxis controller left or right banks the dragon, pointing it down sends the mount into a steep dive, and pulling it up executes a climb. Jabbing the controller forward executes a variety of melee attacks depending on the size and strength of a foe; smaller dragons are simply smashed headlong, while more powerful dragons have to be grappled with and defeated by a series of correct button presses corresponding to on-screen prompts. Here, the game rewards players who complete a successful series of button presses with an elaborate animation of a kill oftentimes involving an enemy dragon taking a sword through its skull.

> "Players will soon learn that dragons don't necessarily rule the skies..."

Lair offers no option for analog-stick based control during the game's flying sequences. It's a risky move given players' familiarity with traditional air-combat games. During a playtest, the natural inclination

was to use the sticks, but this only caused violent and jarring camera shifts. Yet in Lair's defense, there's something fairly neat about using natural motions to control the dragon, diving down on huge enemy ships before spitting flame and pulling up quickly to avoid injury or banking sharply to get behind an enemy in order to execute a deadly melee attack.

The air combat is suitably chaotic, with dragons of all types littering the skies. Factor Five will offer seven different dragon types, each with different inclinations and vulnerabilities. Initially, players can rely on flames to assault enemies; later, they'll need a well-rounded set of flame and melee attacks, as well as a lot of strategic flying. Dragons will get smarter as the game toughens, and players will need to be wary of foes attacking from their blind spots and the flanks.

Traditional controls are available when the dragon lands, and here, Lair offers players carnage in massive doses. An early level has two opposing ground forces battling across a huge stone bridge, with players needing to do whatever they can to ensure victory for their side. Initially, a dragon will have to perform ground-based rescues, snatching up important allies with their claws and flying them off to safety. Once that duty's done, players are free to streak across the battlefield raining death from above, to pick up huge creatures such as rhinos or minotaur-like Tauros and then hurl them like bowling balls, or to land and tear into the enemy up close and personal.

Ground-based combat is genuinely fun, with a dragon able to smash through waves of foes or crunch them beneath their jaws. A momentum meter tracks the player's skill at smashing the opposition, and destroying the enemy in the sight of ground-based allies will oftentimes turn the tide of a fight.

Size matters in Lair, and players will soon learn that dragons don't necessarily rule the skies. The enemy forces, the Mokai, use enormous flying mantas to transport their troops. Lair's first boss, a sea- and air-based coral snake, clocks in at a mile in length; killing this thing when it first appears in the game's fifth level may well become someone's full-time job.

Lair — preview

System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Factor Five
Publisher	Sony
Available	July

No More Tears. . .just lots and lots of dead bodies

Devil May Cry 4

words Greg Orlando

"Fans of the series will be glad to note Capcom hasn't forgotten Dante."

Neophyte hero Nero—no relation to the sadistic former Roman Caesar—is a pallid lad who never tans. His right arm glows with power and may well be possessed. He calls it "devil bringer," and though he admits it's cool, he's also very much a realist on the matter. "The damn thing drives me crazy," he muses.

Nero is the star of the show in Capcom's third-person action game Devil May Cry 4. As Nero, players will get to shoot and slash their way through endless hordes of demons and monsters, some of which are so bad-ass they have sickles on their feet. Armed with both a powerful sword ("Red Queen") and dual-chambered gun ("Blue Rose"), Nero is an imposing sort. Armed with the gun, sword, and his magic arm, he's an ass-kicker without peer. Nero can use his arm to grab foes, slam them to the ground, or draw them close to him. This combined with the game's sword and gun-based attacks allow for gobs of sadistic creativity when it comes to dispatching enemies. It's possible, then, to grab an enemy, pull it close or push it away, slam it down to the ground, and then knock it up in the air. While the enemy's in the air, gun attacks can be used to juggle it, or Nero can leap into the air to perform a series of mid-air combinations before topping the spectacle off by catching a foe with his sword and spinning it around for a comical coup de grace.

The game looks simply beautiful, and Capcom litters Cry 4 with stunning scenes. At one point, Nero squares off against a huge, four-legged fire demon named Belial in what appears to be a town straight out of the American Wild West. The demon's protected by a coat of flame, so Nero has to attack from a distance until coat is dissipated, at which time he can rush in to perform a series of devastating strikes. In motion, this scene is stunning, punctuated by flickering fire effects and a darkening sky.

Fans of the series will be glad to note Capcom hasn't forgotten Dante, the protagonist for the first three Devil May Cry titles. Dante will return as a playable character once again, but his role is certainly subordinate to Nero's—and it's not certain what relationship he'll have with Nero. For now, Capcom will only hint that Dante appears seemingly as a nemesis for the game's new lead.

Devil May Cry 4

System(s)	PlayStation 3, Xbox 360, PC
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	October

Looks like a cold day in hell.

Resident Evil 4

Still Evil After All These Years

words Greg Orlando

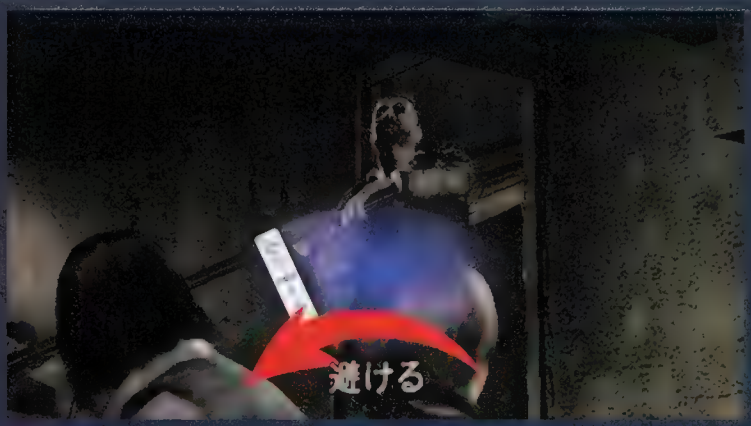
Keiji Inafune, Capcom's managing corporate officer, is apparently not a very big fan of irony. Inafune recently told a crowd of assembled game journalists at a San Francisco press event, "The Capcom I want to create will not be afraid to take risks."

Then, Capcom announced Resident Evil 4 for the Wii while saying not one word about the game everyone in the audience wanted to know about: Resident Evil 5.

Capcom's delightfully undead cash cow will be propped up yet again for another milking. The third-person survival horror game originally saw release for the Nintendo GameCube in 2005, and an updated version was released for the PlayStation 2 some 10 months later. Both versions were unflinchingly excellent, offering a reworked series of controls, a faster pace, and a dramatic reduction in the game's puzzles.

The game's plot brought Leon Kennedy from Resident Evil 2 to the fore. Kennedy was called upon to rescue the president's ugly daughter Ashley Graham from a kooky European cult. Instead of fighting the undead as was a staple of the previous Evil titles, Kennedy battled human cult members whose minds were subverted by parasites—along with the requisite complement of giants, chainsaw-wielding maniacs, and monsters. Because it dared to change the status quo and did it with both grace and style, Evil 4 was universally accepted as the best game in the Resident Evil series. It is, in all honesty, no surprise Capcom would consider putting the game on the new Nintendo Wii."

"It is, in all honesty, no surprise Capcom would consider putting the game on the new Nintendo Wii."



Nintendo Wii.

Now comes caveat after caveat. There's no glossing over the fact that Evil 4 is two years old, and is likely to have been played by anyone who wanted to sample it. There's also no getting around the fact that adding some "minor adjustments" and motion-sensitive controls will not dramatically alter the game's experience. Resident Evil 4 is a great game, to be certain. But the Wii version of it will not be anything new or revelatory.

The new Wii-specific controls do suit Resident Evil 4's run-and-gun style of play. The Wii remote will be used to aim hero Leon Kennedy's gun. To support the game's new lightgun aiming, Kennedy's guns will no longer have laser sights, but rather a circular gun target will appear where the bullets will go. Shaking the remote reloads the gun in Kennedy's hand and, when no weapon is equipped, the same movement will execute a knife attack. Shaking is also used in other situations, such as when it's necessary for Kennedy to run like the dickens to avoid a huge boulder, to shake a zombie or other foe off, to hack and slash at a giant enemy's tentacles (after jumping on its back, of course), or to simply dodge a knife thrust from the evil mercenary Krauser. When playing the president's daughter Ashley, players also need to make cranking motions with the remote to turn—what else?—a crank to open access to a new area.

The Wii nunchuk handles Kennedy's movements, and that controller's C button can be used to make a knife attack without the need to shake the remote. As with the game's PlayStation 2 and GameCube versions, the Wii iteration of 4 will also feature a series of gameplay moments modeled after the Dreamcast adventure Shenmue's "quick-time events." During these moments, say, when Kennedy and Krauser have their epic knife fight, the game will flash a series of button commands on screen. Successful inputs ensure Kennedy survives, and it's likely these moments will be augmented with motion-sensitive controls to allow the protagonist to duck, roll, or tilt his body.

Evil gets another day in the sun this June.

Resident Evil 4

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	June

Project Treasure Island Z

Rawrr Arrrrgh!

Greg Orlando

Those with no imaginations need not bother with Project Island Z.

Capcom's bringing puzzles and cuteness in equal doses with the charming adventure Project Island Z. The game is an extended showcase for the Nintendo Wii's motion sensitive controls, but also promises to be a wonderfully fun, and pirate-laden adventure in the process.

Players take the role of Zack, a diminutive, chocolate-bar loving pirate in training. To emphasize his piratehood (or at least his inclination toward such), Zach wears a giant red buccaneer's hat atop his head, one that seems to be adorned with a stylized skull. And because the game is eminently cute, Zack has himself a sidekick in Charlie Bell, a perpetually grinning golden monkey with a propeller attached to his head.

Zack's goal is to become the best pirate ever, and he's questing to find a lost pirate ship. What he finds, of course, is adventure and puzzles galore. It's the player's job then, to guide Zack and Charlie through the hot spots—but Capcom has changed the rules somewhat for Project Island Z.

It's not enough for players to simply identify a puzzle's solution. At one point, Zack and Charlie need to cross a chasm. The solution quickly presents itself in the form of a tree that's been partially hacked. Tipping it over will create a makeshift bridge. When Zack approaches the weakened tree, an on-screen prompt appears in the top-right corner of the game screen: a little bald man holding a Wii remote. This signals to the player that a specific motion must be made with the Wii controller. In this case, the obvious solution is to push the remote back and forth to simulate shoving the tree over.

The obvious, in this case, does not work, but it does serve to push players in the right direction. The shaking awakens a sleeping centipede, which then pops out from the tree to menace both Zack and his monkey pal. Using the monkey's magical transmutation abilities, it's possible to turn Charlie into a real bell that Zack can shake to transform other items. Here, after the player shakes the remote vigorously, the centipede becomes a centisaw.

Now that players have the correct tool for the job, the game requires players discover how to use it correctly. Holding

the Wii remote like a real saw and pushing and pulling it back and forth will do the job just nicely; Zack uses the centisaw to slice the tree and create his bridge.

Later, a locked door demands a key, but the easily identifiable solution is not so easily accessed. A snake, however, can be transformed into a slither grabber, an extending arm of sorts. That task managed, players must then discover the correct motion to simulate using such an item, be it stretching the remote up toward the sky, or perhaps simply making a thrusting motion forward.

Capcom representatives claim that in this 40-hour adventure, players will be able to use their remotes in 80 different ways to solve puzzles. During a game demo, it was possible to align the remote as if it were a flute to play a series of notes, make a scooping motion to collect water, thrust the remote forward and then turn it to simulate the insertion of a key into its lock followed by the unlocking itself, and rotate the controller to turn a video crank.

The game sprawls over seven huge worlds and contains a wealth of about 500 or so items to manipulate in various ways. But these are just sound bites or perhaps bullet points for the game's box, fluff easily forgotten in light the of intellectual challenge and puzzle solving that Project Treasure Island Z offers. The game may look like standard kiddy fare, but it's got brains aplenty. Better still, it seems to revel in its status as a game that might make people shake with frustration. Bring it on, Capcom.

Project Treasure Island Z

System(s)	Wii
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Online/Multi	NA
Available	Fall

100% Grade-A Nintendo Wii.

"The game may look like standard kiddy fare, but it's got brains aplenty."

Two Worlds

Massive open, action role playing

words [redacted]

"The game is being touted as a new way of experiencing the most traditional of RPG storytelling..."

S

when venturing off the beaten path can excite for the mere mood of adventure. Running into a pair of farmers harvesting wheat, swimming to a crumbling structure in the middle of a lake, turning on an oil lamp in an abandoned house... the quieter moments are not ignored.

He's off to see the wizard to get a neck...

Two Worlds	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Reality Pump Studios
Publisher	Southpeak
Online/Multi	1-8
Available	Summer

Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD Remix

Super SD fun!

words Brady Fiechter

Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD Remix, or SPFIITHDR, first released as Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo in the arcades in 1996, and then next on Saturn and PlayStation, and routinely referred to as Puzzle Fighter, is now coming to XBLA and PS3 Network.

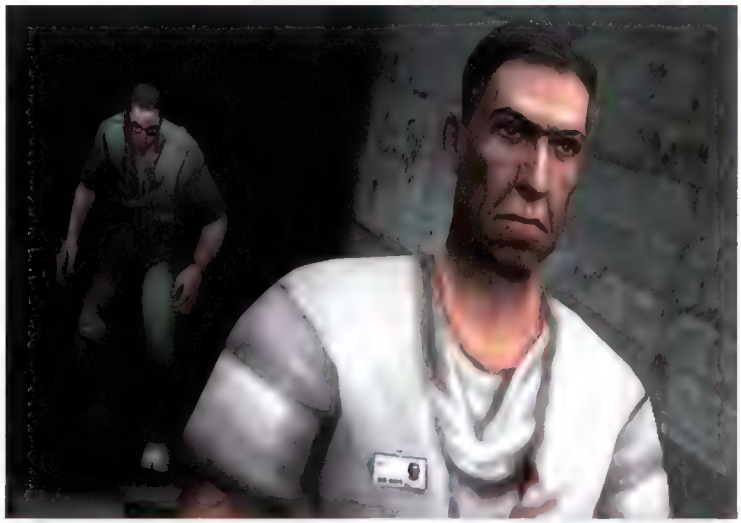
The big deal here is the online play, which for long time freak fans like myself—the hours logged on the Saturn version bordered on irresponsible—is an obvious reason to revisit this crazy addictive puzzle game. The graphics are being redrawn and decorated in HD up to 1080p, handled by UDON Entertainment, who has worked on a number of comics, including Street Fighter. There's no drastic overhaul going on, but it's nice to see we're getting more than a quick dump to the online arena without any attention to the fact that the game is indeed getting up there in years. Capcom claims they'll be rebalancing the play a bit too, so we'll have to wait and see what effect that'll have on the core experience.

Super Puzzle Fighter II Turbo HD Remix	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360/PS3
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	Fall

Manhunt 2

This won't hurt a bit...

words Greg Orlando



Tortured antihero Daniel Lamb carries an ax. Soon, very soon, there will be chopping.

Rockstar is at it again. Manhunt 2 is nearing release, and promises to be more straightforwardly violent than its predecessor, a game that was the first to allow one character to kill another with a plastic bag.

Manhunt 2 is not a sequel to the original, third-person perspective adventure Manhunt. It has a new protagonist in Lamb, and a storyline far removed from Manhunt's take on Richard Connell's short story "The Most Dangerous Game." The unrepentant violence, gruesome fatalities, and stealth-action of the first game are back but, as befitting a sequel, have been suitably heightened.

Lamb, a former doctor, is a resident of Dixmor Asylum when Manhunt 2 begins. He's spent six years there, the unfortunate result of military experimentation gone awry. Things change dramatically when chaos erupts and the patients are freed from their captivity. This sets in motion Lamb's quest to discover the circumstances behind his institutionalization and, sure as death and taxes, to seek vengeance on the people who put him there.

Although the game features stealth elements requiring Lamb to find concealment in shadows and to walk slowly so as to avoid detection, the game's true focus is on the slaughter. Lamb will have access to four different weapon classes, from single-use syringes to shotguns. Each can be used to produce three different executions, and a time-based mechanic determines how elaborate the killing is. If Lamb lingers behind an unsuspecting victim, he can perform a gruesome, multipart killing involving, say, an ax to the gut, a punch to the face, and then multiple blood-spraying whacks with the blade. Other executions are similarly horrifying, with Lamb using wire cutters to pull out someone's vocal cords, or a baseball bat to pound an enemy into meat paste.

Manhunt 2	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 2, Wii, PSP
Developer	Rockstar London
Publisher	Rockstar Games
Available	Fall

Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles

Way of the (Light) Gun

words Greg Orlando

"Take aim at the shroud of lies!" the trailer for the lightgun shooter Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles proclaimed.

Finally, the evil corporation Umbrella gets is well-deserved comeuppance for unleashing the T-virus and endless zombies on the hapless population of Raccoon City. Umbrella Chronicles promises to take players on a tour of scenic locales from Resident Evils Zero through three, including the creepy mansion from the original game. It also will offer brand-new environments such as Umbrella's headquarters, before culminating in what Capcom describes as "the end of Umbrella."

Players simply point and shoot to blast their foes. The game is on rails, meaning players can't choose where there character goes, but can influence the path they take by destroying creatures, obstacles, or parts of the environment. Just about everything in the game can be blasted, and hidden items such as weapons, ammunition, and health-restoring herbs are often revealed in the process.

The game looked absolutely fine, and featured some nifty third-person perspective cut-scenes showing off the game's heroes such as Chris Redfield, Jill Valentine, and Billy Coen. It was impossible to avoid drawing comparisons between Chronicles and Sega's shooter House of the Dead, but, as the kids are oftentimes wont to say, it's all good in the zombie-killing hood.

Resident Evil: The Umbrella Chronicles	preview
System(s)	Wii
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	TBD

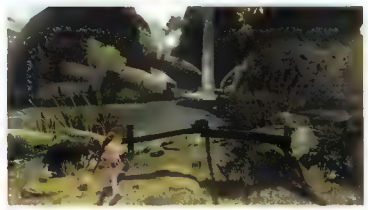
They look harmless enough... Still; you gotta kill 'em all.

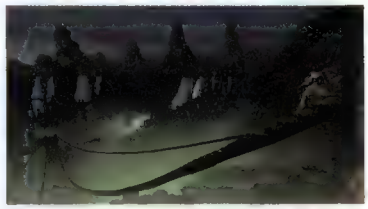
Heavenly Sword

...and everything else

words Dave Halverson

Originally planned for the Xbox 360, when Microsoft passed on Heavenly Sword SCEE swooped in to pick it up, and now it's touted as the PS3's crown jewel of 2007. Imagine if you will a martial arts drama on PS3 from one of the UK's top developers in the vein of God of War. Now insert massive battle scenes where hundreds of characters occupy the screen and arguably the most beautiful female heroin in existence. That's Heavenly Sword—the PS3 franchise that will bring anyone who sees it to their knees while simultaneously devouring every last negative word they ever uttered about the PS3. Ninja Theory states that Heavenly will exploit the potential of gaming as the new artistic entertainment medium. They won't get any argument from me.



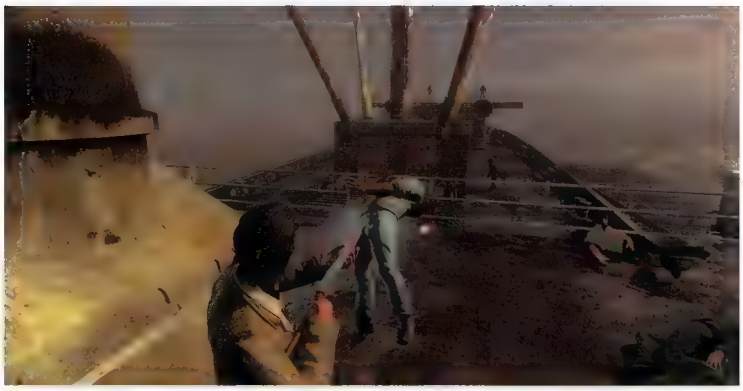


Heavenly Sword	preview
System(s)	PlayStation 3
Developer	Ninja Theory
Publisher	SCEA
Available	October

Hei$t

A pocket full of Benjamins

words Mike Griffin



"Hei$t is all about 60s music, robbing banks, and classic cars," beams Maxx Kaufman, Creative Director at InXile Entertainment and developer of Hei$t, a game that will meld GTA-style sandbox shenanigans with immaculately planned bank jobs.

It's 1969 and Johnny Sutton has just been released from the clink. Johnny's a career thief, recently incarcerated for attempting to rob the San Francisco Mint. This is also where his father was shot dead, double-crossed by someone close to the job. Now Johnny's back on the scene, his crew—Kid, Crumb and Cracker—are back in town, and there's money to be made. The Bells Cargo bank, Swiss Private and Citadel Bank are all ripe for the picking. Night clubs, restaurants, corner stores—sure, why not? Johnny's also out for revenge.

At its core, Hei$t is a game about planning and executing big bank robberies. You can take part in the usual sandbox city mischief like carjacking and interacting with various street factions, but the real value here is the thrill of the heist. Johnny will receive tips about jobs from Uncle Sal and then it's up to you to case the joint and plan your theft. "A lot of what you're doing is time management. Looking at how many people there are, what the tellers are doing, how many cameras are in play," explains Sean Patton, lead designer on the game. "You can plan the bank approach really precisely for your crew members, but they're also smart enough to take your lead. Your guys will try to look as non-descript as possible, spreading out, taking up positions around the bank while you assess."

Heist	preview
System(s)	Xbox 360, PlayStation 3, PC
Developer	InXile Entertainment
Publisher	Codemasters
Available	Q4

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The Darkness

Food for the soul

words Brady Fiechter

I suppose it will come as little surprise that the latest look at the world of The Darkness is, well, dark. Really dark. Everything is shadowy and filled with despair. An omniscient voice in your head tells you that some serious shit is about to go down, at which point wicked tentacles pop from your body, snap heads and dismember bodies that for some reason are dumb enough to get in your way. Your little snake-like friends are hungry too, feasting on the heart of a corpse impaled on an iron fence surrounding a cemetery.

The next time you hear about developer Starbreeze's The Darkness will be for its review, but in the mean time, read up on what lead designer Jens Andersson and the team are up to.

interview

Jens Andersson, lead designer

play: You've got a couple months left in development. How are things going in the final stretch?

Jens Andersson: It's definitely the hardest time of the development cycle. There is so much that everyone wants to achieve and you really need to prioritize what is really important for the game. Every time you sit down with the game you find millions of things that you would like to change, but every once in a while you manage to play through a section of the game and suddenly everything works. Those moments can be extremely satisfying.

Have you had to work through any major issues since we last talked about the game?

Mostly the obvious ones like memory and performance that will probably always haunt developers, no matter how next-gen things get. One thing that is always hard and has been even more so in The Darkness is making sure that the player really understands everything we want him to understand. There are many tools to guide a player in the right direction, but to be able to appreciate the game it is important that you understand why you need to go in that direction and also feel that you want to take that path. It can be very hard to achieve that in a game, especially one where you are allowed to branch off.

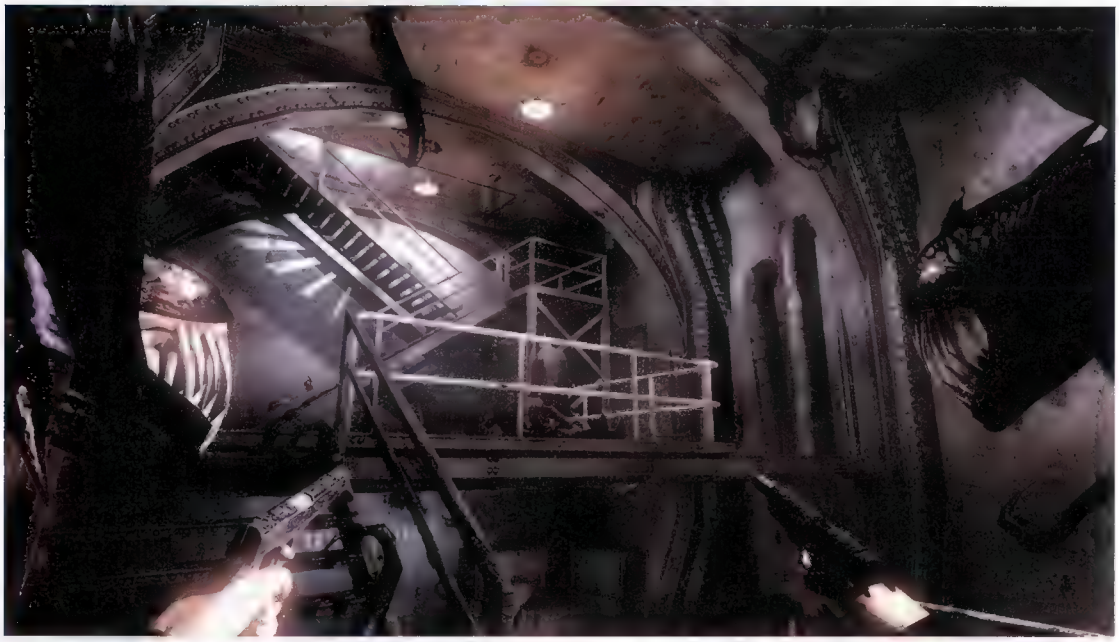
"It's a very exhilarating feeling to be chased by things that can crawl on walls and ceilings."

Jens Andersson, lead designer

Say hello to your little friends.

What aspects of the game have received the most attention?
Interest from press and the public seems to be both very specific and very broad. Some find features like the TV system to be really interesting while others don't really see what the fuss is about. People are generally very interested in how the Darkness powers work and how you can use them, which makes perfect sense since that is what the action is about. Also, while people have seen bits from the game for about a year now, I think we finally managed to find and implement those key things that make the graphics both great-looking and different at the same time, and graphics are always something that people want to talk about.

It looks like you've really tweaked the close-quarter gunplay, the automatic kills, and added some extra little touches visually.



Well, we are of course working all over the place and are trying to polish everything that needs to be polished. The close-quarter gunplay is a perfect example of a feature that can go from OK to stunning by just working on things like sound and working out the bugs.

You've made some changes to the Jackie character.
Yes, we've made a lot of iterations of the Jackie model and each time he has improved. It's important that the character you are playing is one of the most interesting things about that game.

Can you talk a little bit about the levels that look like they take place in the sort of underworld, World War setting? That was a surprise considering the game was revealed as an adventure in New York.
Yes, we've intentionally kept that a secret for some time now. Most of the game takes place in New York, but for reasons I won't get into since I don't want to spoil the story, Jackie needs to go to a place called Otherworld. The Otherworld is a place connected to the Darkness that looks like a surreal version of World War I where people are fighting for eternity. Here Jackie will learn more about the Darkness and how to control it. It was important for us to have a location like Otherworld in the game since we believe strongly that a game like this needs variation both in pacing and in setting.

How's the multiplayer component coming together?
It's coming along very nicely. While the focus of the game has always been single player, we wanted to have a simple, but strong, multiplayer element. People will recognize the setup with Deathmatch and CTF but we have something that is obviously different with Darklings thrown into the mix. We've also been very inspired with the early multiplayer games like Quake that were extremely fast paced. It's a very exhilarating feeling to be chased by things that can crawl on walls and ceilings.

Having lived The Darkness for the past few years, any trouble with nightmares yet?
At this point our nightmares are more about things like suddenly realizing that we've sent the PS3 version of the game to Microsoft for certification or something.

So how do you deal with the long hours and stress of finishing up?
It seems like as long as there is momentum and the feeling that you are always getting closer to finishing the game, the rest comes naturally. Of course, at some times it can feel like you are going backwards, and things are breaking apart and then I'm really happy there are so many talented and dedicated

The Darkness

System(s)	PS3, Xbox 360
Developer	Starbreeze
Publisher	2K Games
Available	June

Moto GP 2007

Bigger, badder, better...faster!

words Dave Halverson

As developers head into their second wave of development, delving deeper into the 360's treasure trove of capabilities, 2nd-generation games are exhibiting power beyond anything we witnessed at launch. As gorgeous as Moto GP 2006 was, 2007 seems 50% better. Reviewing last year's game we called for busier pits, deforming trackside terrain, and more realistic crowds, but Climax have added so much more. Who knew that the 360 could mimic the horsepower on display in games like Gran Turismo HD? Apparently, Climax...

Moto GP 2007	
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Climax UK
Publisher	THQ
Available	September

Interview with Moto GP 2007 Producer Jet Weaver

play: MGP 2006 was and is a truly great game although there is room for improvement. For one, the all-important connection between the pits and rider has never been exhibited in the series. Will we see them at trackside flashing their instructions? Will there be active pits?
Jet: The pits and the pit lane crew play a much more significant role in MotoGP 07 than in previous titles. We have authentically modelled the interiors of each team's garage for the first time, the mechanics and pit crew will be swarming all over the grid alongside cameramen and brolley girls at the start of races helping prepare the bike, and, as you fly along the main straight you'll see plenty of activity from your team management in the trackside booths as they lean over the pit wall with their boards to communicate to you during the race.

Finally! The courses looked great last year too, however, there was little in the way of trackside animation. Crowds still appear flat, repetitive and stiff. Are you adding anything there?
This area is perhaps where the differences between MotoGP 06 and MotoGP 07 manifest themselves most strikingly. We had crowds last year, a few thousand on each track that mixed 2D and 3D with some animation scope. In MotoGP 07 we have up to 100,000 all-3D crowd models on any individual track, 20,000 of them in frame in any individual scene. These models have a wide range of appearances, actions and animations too– they cheer on the riders, they wave flags, they take photographs, they let off flares.

Wow. Any new courses for 2007?
MotoGP 07 will feature all of the authentic bikes, riders and tracks you'll see during the season which starts in Qatar next week. This will include the new track added to the calendar, Misano in Italy.

To an extent all of the bikes have felt and sounded the same. Will you pull a Gran Turismo and go for true bike characteristics and sound?
We've been working hard to create more of a performance differential between the individual bikes this year. Each have slightly different characteristics and we're endeavouring to reflect that in game so players can find the right bike to suit their riding style. Different engine mappings will of course mean different audio behaviors too.

What about sound effects? Any improvements on the track?
Absolutely. The aforementioned crowd will play a major role in this of course, their reaction to riders will be contextual to how a rider is actually performing; expect a considerably different reaction if you fly past them in the lead or limp past them well

"As gorgeous as Moto GP 2006 was, 2007 seems 50% better."

adrift of the pack. A number of other facets will add even more layers of atmosphere, including tannoys around the circuit and aircraft and helicopters overhead.

What about the handling? The learning curve for GP racers has always been problematic for non-fans since the proper technique involves premeditating each turn. Will the feel be more simulation or will you include a more "arcadey" feel as well?
Our handling model has always been well received critically but it's a comment to say that it has tended to veer towards the simulation end of the market – it has required some dedication by the gamer to perfect. This year we have made some changes in order to try and appeal to not only bike fans, but racing fans in general. The aim is to make it more accessible by providing much more feedback through the bike to the user – the bike will fishtail and wheelie under load for example– so they can better judge when the bike is in danger of wiping out and tailor their approach accordingly.

That's awesome. Extreme mode was one of 06's best aspects. What's new for 2007?
Major track overhauls, 20 new Extreme Bikes for 07 and much more scope for customization of visual components and performance parameters with all changes made to the bike viewable within the front end before being committed.

Will we still have to earn our way in or is it a part of the core game?
While MotoGP mode is of course the core of the game, this time we are answering demand and opening up a selection of Extreme tracks out of the box.

Moving onto the graphics: last year's bikes and riders looked cool thanks to some nice normal mapping, however grass and dirt remained flat textures. Will they be realistic?
Expect a big step up in quality this time round. The team's reference gathering trips to the real circuits have provided excellent source material to create incredibly vivid and detailed textures for grass, dirt, rocks and all other natural trackside elements.

Infield details such as the team trucks were also missing. Will we see our team colors in the infield this year?
They'll all be present and correct, indeed there are a whole lot of new buildings and vehicles scattered around all of the tracks as part of our drive to capture the sheer scale of population at a race day weekend.

What about weather? Will rain and cloud cover be more prominent and realistic?
Look out for much enhanced wet weather including a very striking "wake" effect.

I noticed something called "Spectacle" in GP mode...
Spectacle is the all encompassing term we use to describe the push to capture the atmosphere and vibrant energy of a race weekend. Spectacle will ensure that there is as much action and movement around the track as there is on it.

Left: last year's 360 game. Right: this year's...What a difference a year makes.

I'm sure your planning something to appease the online crowd...
MotoGP has always had a large online following and there are still up to 5000 people per day playing the 06 game online. As well as the substantial content base we carry forward from its predecessor, MotoGP 07 will add a Pink Slip Racing Mode allowing gamers to wager their customized Extreme Bikes against other online players in a winner takes all high stakes battle.

I'll go easy on ya...
We'll see.

Art: Dany Orzio

Best-of SEGA Part 2

compiled by Dave Halverson

Welcome to part 2 of our Best of Sega feature. In light of some recent acquisitions in this wonderfully unpredictable industry of ours, it's plausible (unlikely, but plausible) that we may see a few more sequels down the road on some of the higher profile titles. But in the meantime we don't see any reason why Sega shouldn't port Astal to PSP and perhaps add a few levels... For that matter why not a Sega collection containing Jet Set Radio, Astal, Guardian Heroes, Bug, Three Dirty Dwarves... C'mon Sega. You can do it!

These consoles were truly treasures. Well, onto Nintendo or NEC we go! Any preference?

Consensus play Top 10 Sega Saturn

01. Panzer Dragoon Saga
02. Guardian Heroes
03. Silhouette Mirage
04. Panzer Dragoon Zwei
05. Grandia
06. Radiant Silvergun
07. Astal
08. NiGHTS
09. Policenauts
10. Shining Force III

Honorable mentions: Bug, Super Tempo

Consensus play Top 10 Dreamcast

01. Resident Evil: Code Veronica
02. Shenmue
03. Jet Set Radio
04. Skies of Arcadia
05. Soul Calibur
06. Grandia II
07. Sonic Adventure
08. Rayman 2
09. MDK 2
10. Phantasy Star Online

Honorable mentions: Shining the Holy Ark, Super Magnetic Neo

Dave Halverson Top Fives

SATURN
01. Guardian Heroes
02. Silhouette Mirage
03. Shining the Holy Ark
04. Astal
05. Clockwork Knight (series)

DREAMCAST
01. Jet Set Radio
02. Rayman 2
03. MDK 2
04. Red Dog
05. Fur Fighters

Brady Fiechter Top Fives

SATURN
01. Guardian Heroes
02. Panzer Dragoon Saga
03. Panzer Dragoon Zwei
04. Silhouette Mirage
05. Super Puzzle Fighter

DREAMCAST
01. Resident Evil: Code Veronica
02. Rayman 2
03. MDK2
04. Soul Calibur
05. Power Stone

Nick Des Barres Top Fives

SATURN
01. Panzer Dragoon Saga
02. Grandia
03. Policenauts
04. Virtua Fighter 2
05. Radiant Silvergun

DREAMCAST
01. Shenmue (series)
02. Skies of Arcadia
03. Phantasy Star Online (series)
04. Resident Evil: Code Veronica
05. Soul Calibur

Casey Loe Top Fives

SATURN
01. Grandia
02. Panzer Dragoon Saga
03. Silhouette Mirage
04. Panzer Dragoon Zwei
05. Shining Force III

DREAMCAST
01. Resident Evil: Code Veronica
02. Shenmue (series)
03. Phantasy Star Online
04. Soul Calibur
05. Crazy Taxi (series)

Mike Griffin Top Fives

SATURN
01. Guardian Heroes
02. NiGHTS
03. Radiant Silvergun
04. Panzer Dragoon Saga
05. Panzer Dragoon 2

DREAMCAST
01. Power Stone
02. Ikaruga
03. Sonic Adventure 1
04. Soul Calibur
05. Sonic Adventure 2

Michael Hobbs Top Fives

SATURN
01. Radiant Silvergun
02. NiGHTS
03. Silhouette Mirage
04. Panzer Dragoon Zwei
05. Virtua Fighter 2

DREAMCAST
01. Ikaruga
02. Phantasy Star Online
03. Sonic Adventure
04. Soul Calibur
05. Street Fighter III Third Strike

play
Staff "round-up"

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MK Armageddon 080
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Reviews

June 2007

Dave Halverson

Editor in Chief

Favorite genres: Platformers, adventure, 2D action, racing, RPGs, sandbox
Now playing: Ninja Gaiden Sigma, Odin Sphere, Tenchu Z, Monster Madness, Motor Storm, Super Paper Mario
Best released game of the year so far: Odin Sphere

Dave can't seem to let go of the past or get enough of the future, causing a strange genetic abnormality to take place. Immune to the burden of sleep or adulthood E Storm plays games new and old, both console and handheld by day, and fades away into any number of strange Japanese cartoons by night leaving only time to write it all down and ponder the true meaning of the universe.

Brady Fiechter

Executive Editor

Favorite genres: Adventure, first-person shooters, action, RPGs
Now playing: MotorStorm, Mario Strikers, Paper Mario
Best released game of the year so far: God of War 2

Under constant pressure by a friend to flee the country and study the ways of the Thaoist, Brady continues to balk, proclaiming that his spiritual journey lies in movies and games. He finds joyful satisfaction in killing things, namely zombies and soldiers and evil creatures, which tend to pop up in some of his favorite genres.

Greg Orlando

Senior Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, adventure, fighting, wrestling
Now playing: Civilization IV, Super Paper Mario
Best released game of the year so far: Lost Planet

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin

PC Editor

Favorite genres: MMORPGs, first-person shooters, action-adventure
Now playing: Overlord, Cell Factor
Best released game of the year so far: God of War 2

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Tomb Raider Anniversary p. 076

The play rating system

10...Perfect
9...Extraordinary
8...Great
7...Good
6...Decent
5...Average
4...Below average
3...Poor
2...Bad
1...Terrible

Nick Des Barres

Japan Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Fighting
Now playing: Odin Sphere, Ace Attorney 4
Best released game of the year so far: Odin Sphere

Nick fondly remembers the first video game he ever played: Trojan, by Capcom, on the NES. He wishes he could claim even earlier gaming-roots, and the modern-day Nick would probably be affronted by the reference to "Trojan" and insist it be called "Tatakai No Banka (Elegy For Battle)", but the fact remains that he's been playing games daily for nearly twenty years and writing about them for twelve. He tends to gravitate towards the classic genres of his youth: RPGs, action/adventure, shooting.

Casey Loe

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: RPGs, action, humming-bird simulators
Now playing: Dracula X Chronicles, Grim Grimoire **Best released game of the year so far:** The Elder Scrolls IV: Shivering Isles

Casey had a promising future as a video game journalist a decade ago, but booze, pills, and his all-consuming hatred of Final Fantasy VIII ultimately left him incomprehensible and unemployable. After spending eight years on the street ranting about Squall Leonhart to winos, schizophrenics, and syphilitic prostitutes, Casey has tricked an old friend into paying him to complain about video games in a national video game magazine.

Eric Patterson

Contributing Editor

Favorite genres: Survival Horror, puzzle, music + Bemani, 2D SNK fighters
Now playing: Wonder Boy in Monster World, Settlers of Catan
Best released game of the year so far: World of Warcraft: Burning Crusade

Eric's reason for over two decades of video gaming is simple: so far, real life has yet to provide him access to zombies, quiet resort towns overrun with demons, ghosts you can trap with a camera, or, you know, a flesh and blood Jill Valentine or Ashley Graham. Mind getting on that, real life?

Heather Campbell

Associate Editor

Favorite genres: Fighting, RPGs, Action, Etc.
Now playing: Gears of War, Symphony of the Night (Live) **Best released game of the year so far:** Guitar Hero 2 (360)

Heather's favorite game would be a hybrid of Street Fighter III and MMORPG level grinding. If someone would craft a title that was endless hours of fighting the same enemies, using classic Capcom button combos, then her death in front of the arcade cabinet would become the stuff of urban legend. Heathers been playing since Aztec Adventure, and still has nightmares about Missile Defence 3-D.

Mike Hobbs

Art Director

Favorite genres: Action, racing, adventure, alternative, shooters
Now playing: Super Rub a Dub
Best released game of the year so far: flOw

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of ideal developers. He's also recently become addicted to RC sailplane flying, so you'll actually find him outside now, absorbing the sun's photons.

Spiderman 3

Bigger is better

words | Heather Campbell

When playing an open-ended sandbox-style licensed game, I find myself in a predicament similar to that of the designers of the game itself. I'm trying to come up with new adjectives to describe gameplay that I've seen before, much in the same way as Treyarch undoubtedly searched for new ways to describe input and action for the title proper. What I end up with in these paragraphs is more of a critique on Spider-Man 2 or Grand Theft Auto, than it is a deconstruction of Spider-Man 3. My words on this game are just expounding on ideas I've had about the sandbox format, much like Spider-Man 3 plays like a hi-res expansion pack of earlier games.

How do you make a sandbox game that satisfies the license, while providing players with a sense of novelty? Treyarch answers with size, narrative, and unlockable options. Manhattan is 2.5 times bigger in Spider-Man 3 than it was in the last game. Cinemas have been replaced with interactive sequences (think Resident Evil or God of War; press the button at the right time to make Spider-Man dodge, jump, etc). Moves aren't purchased, but rather unlocked. And with the black suit comes a giant upgrade in combat options.

But other than the unbelievably gorgeous graphics (standing atop the Empire State Building as the sun rises through the fog really is impressive), what has changed for Spider-Man? Why should a gamer pick up a copy of this game over a much less expensive Spider-Man 2? Sure, there's the story—which, thankfully, doesn't limit itself to the linear path of the movie, but rather expands on the Marvel world with villains like The Scorpion, The Lizard, and others—and there's the minor gameplay changes, but why should you play Spider-Man 3?

"Manhattan is 2.5 times bigger in Spider-Man 3 than it was in the last game."

For me, the size of the game is directly related to the answer. So many gamers agree that web-swinging from building to building is the fundamental joy in Spider-Man games previous. So, it should follow that with more buildings comes more enjoyment. Racing from one side of Manhattan to another is a longer, more satisfying journey, and like a flight simulator (where the means are the end), dashing through the air as Spider-Man against such beautiful backdrops is the reason in and of itself. Enjoy the missions, the options, the achievements and the story, but you'll always return for the flight, and the size of the world. For once, bigger means better.

Spider-Man 3	score 8.5
+	Huge, beautiful and detailed world.
–	A lot of this is just like Spider-Man 2.
System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Treyarch
Publisher	Activision
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May 4
ESRB Rating	T

GRIM GRIMOIRE

Odin's brother from another mother

words Casey Loe

After a decade of silence from Vanillaware, the beloved indie-developer has two new titles hitting American shelves within a month of each other. Atlus's Odin Sphere is currently hogging the spotlight, and for good reason—the game looks utterly gorgeous. Nippon Ichi's Grim Grimoire is keeping a much lower profile, and it's natural to assume that it's the lesser of the two games. After all, Odin Sphere's insanely detailed hand-drawn world has an impact that Grim Grimoire's more subtle visuals can't possibly match. But Vanillaware is as deft at game design as they are at animation, and Grim Grimoire may well be the best Japanese-made RTS since Technosoft's Herzog series gave birth to the genre.

The hero of Grim Grimoire is Lillet Blan, a young mage learning the ropes of magic at Hogwarts Aca... Uh, I mean, the "Silver Star Tower." Her education consists of learning the four types of runes: Glamour, Alchemy, Sorcery, and Necromancy. There are three grimoires of each type, and five levels per tome, for a grand total of sixty spells that can be used to summon familiars (units) or grant them special powers. There's a conventional rock-paper-scissors system governing the relationships between the runes, but the strategy goes much deeper—each of the familiars is more than its place on the chart and the sum of their stats. Among Lillet's menagerie you'll find specters that can phase through walls and suicide-bomb foes, elves that mine mana to build traps, dragons that can't hatch until they survives a vulnerable stage as an egg, and angels that function as heavy artillery cannons.

Grim Grimoire doesn't have quite the depth or complexity of a western RTS like Command & Conquer 3, but it does have an elegance that such games lack. The

"GG doesn't have quite the depth or complexity of a western RTS like Command & Conquer 3, but it does have an elegance that such games lack."

More lovely Vanillaware 2D to behold.

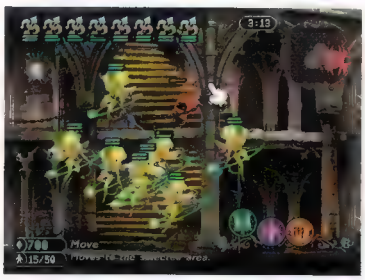
interface is nearly perfect; while Electronic Arts acts lobbies for a Nobel Prize every time they map PC mouse controls to the 360 pad, Vanillaware has quietly put together a perfectly intuitive DualShock control scheme that allows you to select and command any unit (or any combination of units) with ease. The developers also gets points for allowing players to pause the flow of time while they navigate the battlefield and issue orders. This sounds heretical in an RTS, but it cuts out a lot of the genre's frustrations while leaving its intensity surprisingly intact.

Don't mistake Grim Grimoire's accessibility for a lack of depth. Great care has been taken to balance every viable strategy, and it's possible to win with everything from rapid-fire unicorn rushes to hour-long defensive campaigns that involve fortifying a corner of the map while you build powerful resources. Virtually every unit will be at the cornerstone of a winning strategy at one stage or another.

My only real complaint with the battles is the overbearing fog of war, which grows back as soon as your scouts leave or die, forcing you to memorize enemy placements and micromanage scouts when you should be concentrating on the frontlines. I also have a quibble with the game's structure: It offers a fair amount of content, but with no ability to level up Lillet, gain any items, or unlock anything (beyond a Hard Mode), it doesn't provide much incentive to dig into the optional battles that exist outside of the roughly 20-hour Story Mode.

I assumed that I would be making heavy use of the game's Skip Scene command to blow through the all-dialogue intermissions that bookend each battle, but Grim Grimoire manages to spin a surprisingly compelling yarn. The story borrows heavily from Harry Potter and Groundhog Day, but makes an impact with a dark fairy-tale flavor and a series of well-executed twists. It's hard to believe that two cardboard cutouts talking to each other can be so much more compelling than the million-dollar CG event scenes in so many other games, but thanks to great writing and strong voice work, they really are. (The English dub is NISA's best yet, and the original Japanese voices are in there too.) It's worth nothing that while the event scenes lack visual polish, they're about the only aspect of Grim Grimoire that does; the character animation in the battles is gorgeous, as is every aspect of the interface, from menus to loading screens. Music director Hitoshi Sakimoto (of Final Fantasy XII fame) penned only a single track for Grim Grimoire, but his team of composers did such a good job on the soundtrack that you'd never know it without reading the credits.

At the moment, the buzz on Odin Sphere is huge, and deservedly so. I hope that will bring some attention to Grim Grimoire, but I fear it will merely be lost in its brother's long shadow. That's a shame—while Grim Grimoire doesn't pack as much visual punch, it's no less of a testament to Vanillaware's game-design and story-telling chops.



Grim Grimoire score 8.5

+	Great RTS, enthralling story, looks and sounds good
–	A little lacking in variety

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Vanillaware
Publisher	NIS America
Online/Multi	None
ESRB Rating	TBD
Available	June 26th

Tenchu Z

Ninja Theory

words Dave Halverson

FROM Software pump out a lot of video games. Aside from developing 12 Armored Core games since 1997 they've also presided over Otogi, Chromehounds, Enchanted Arms, and the last four Tenchu games, to name but a few. You'd think that with so much going on at any given time they might stumble more often, but those (Spriggan, Kings Field) days seem to be well behind them. I had my doubts about Tenchu Z going in, but they were systematically laid to rest over the course of a handful of missions out of 50, making this the largest Tenchu game to date.

For this eighth game in the series, FROM has decided to shake things up, giving series mainstays Ayame and Rikimaru a reprieve in favor of a creation mode (although Rikimaru presides over the game's missions) and the addition of 4-player co-op play over Live. As an adoring Ayame fan the news of her absence had me contemplating falling on the proverbial sword, however, even though body shape is limited to one stock female or male form, the female can be made to resemble Ayame via hair and face type, so crisis averted. In fact, given the game's ever-burgeoning collection of garments and accessories I can't imagine ever going back. A big part of the fun in Z is tweaking your character as you earn money for completing missions; the better you do the higher the reward. Not only can you buy and change clothes and accessories throughout, but you can also purchase a multitude of items and special moves that add significantly to the action, or lack thereof depending on your style of play…

The gameplay is decidedly Tenchu (if it ain't broke…) with the addition of more items and moves acting as this iteration's prime nugget, along with a bevy of graphical refinements and a much-improved camera. I wasn't all that impressed as things got underway but by mission ten I had to swab the dribble as each passing level revealed subsequently finer detail and diversity. I'm a sucker

Lush gardens provide good cover.

"The texturing in Z is exquisite, especially applied to the Feudal Japan construct."

for normal mapping, and subtle touches applied to water, flora, and cloth make my knees buckle. The texturing in Z is exquisite, especially applied to the Feudal Japan construct. Touches such as characters becoming covered with blood after a kill or dirty from creeping under a dojo give me a Kool-Aid smile. The core character models could be better, but otherwise Z is an altogether breathtaking game visually. Further gameplay refinements can be found in the game's combat. Where in past versions confrontation was not recommended, the combat in Z is nicely refined, especially if you choose to spend your earnings on moves. You can go stealth and focus on item usage, or strengthen your combat skills and play loose. It's still not the best course of action—you earn more for going undetected—but the option makes for a better rounded overall experience, especially when you're engaged in online play and more prone to engage the enemy. The one gameplay hitch that remains are bouts of dimwitted AI. Compared to most stealth games it's still exceptional, however, when you slaughter a guy and leave him lying on the floor the next guy should at least take notice. To be fair, some do.

As with every game in the series the environments and music in Z are a huge part of the allure. If you're a sucker for Edo period Japan and its Biwa-drenched traditional music, break out the tissues Tito. Of all the time periods I've seen the current wave of technology applied to, it seems most effectual here. Diffused interior lighting, ornate gardens, tile roofs, damp caverns, various bodies of water, quaint villages, and Japan's wonderful thickets come to life brilliantly in Z, adding a measurable wow factor to the tried and true gameplay of the series.

Ninja games being as rare as they've become, it's nice to have Tenchu back, especially given the number of refinements FROM have added, along with the online play. With Z showing up this early in the 360 cycle it's likely we'll see another one or maybe two before the generation is out. Further graphical refinements (such as tracking blood puddles and more fun with shadows) along with perfecting the AI would be most welcome.

Tenchu Z — score: 8.5

+	Gorgeous levels, deep character creation and mod system, beautiful music and 50 big levels.
–	Character models could be better; enemy AI a bit dodgy.

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	FROM Software
Publisher	Microsoft
Online/Multi	4-player
Available	June 12
ESRB Rating	M

This is the kind of character creation I can live with.

Tomb Raider Anniversary

The first and still the best

words Brady Fiechter

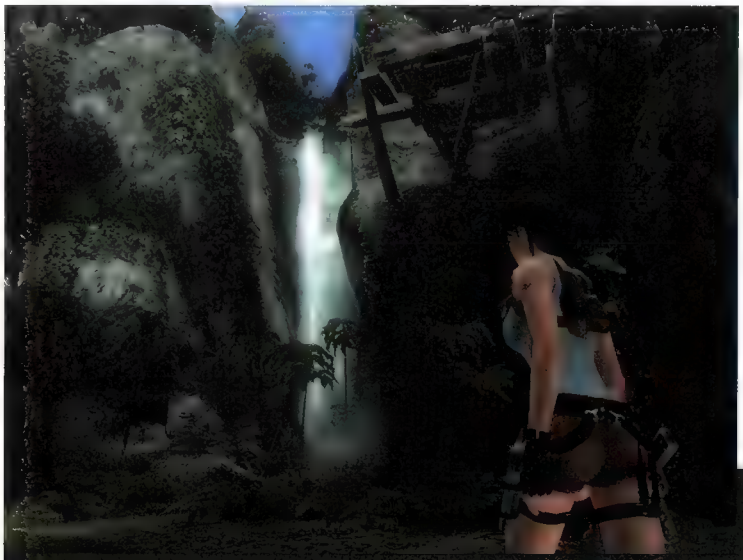
I'm not sure exactly what I was expecting from Tomb Raider: Anniversary, but it certainly wasn't to become so absorbed by the experience that I felt like I had played the original game again for the first time. Just because she's showing her age doesn't mean 10 years later Lara can't still surprise and excite.

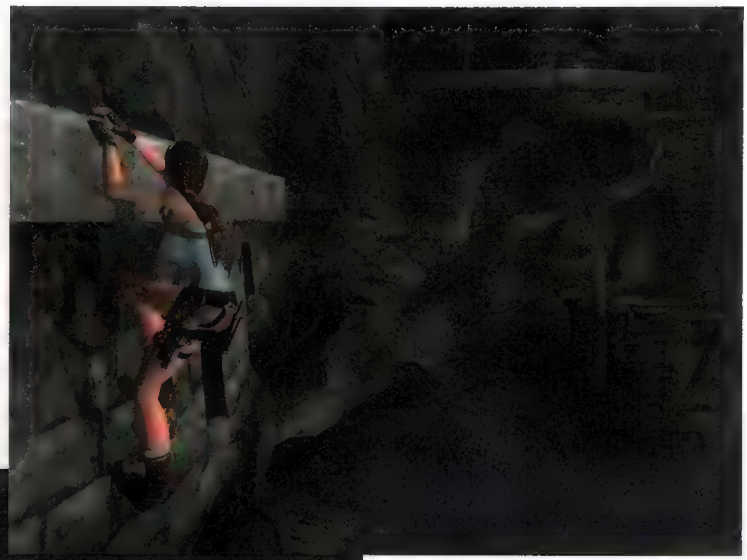
I come to Tomb Raider: Anniversary with tremendous admiration for the PSOne game from which it's reconstructed, considering Lara's first adventure one of the rare greats. This latest Tomb Raider is not that same new experience, but with its nostalgic magnetism and remarkable modern expansions, the game is a treasure for the real Tomb Raider fan. It's more faithful than Tomb Raider: Legend, which was on its own fantastic, and is the best in the series, I believe, when kept in context.

Ten years is a long passage on the video game time line, and I'm surprised at just how different this feels from the first Tomb Raider: Anniversary may be mighty faithful in its structure, but so much about it has been embellished and extended that you'll often times forget you already passed through the same caves and scaled the same ancient structures. Those moments that stir up past emotions are sometimes subtle, sometimes obvious and strongly enriching, making Tomb Raider: Anniversary an even better game than it could ever be without a history. And yet for all the important aids of nostalgia, on its own, Anniversary is grand gamemaking.

Few games offer this same sense of isolation and adventure. I argued this opinion with a colleague, who doesn't accept that this mode of linearity is truly adventurous, but what he fails to appreciate is how the game sinks into the imagination through its emotive world interaction and engaging formation of setpieces. The architecture is full of wonder and mood; when you enter a room and anticipate the path to the top, to the puzzle, to the next opening, it's a rush that just isn't duplicated in any other game I have played. The path may be defined, but its passage is a wonderful journey. That doesn't make Tomb Raider superior as much as exceptional in

Enemy patterns/AI are much more advanced...





Looking ridiculously better than PSOne...

what draws me in to its world.

You certainly can't ignore the technical sophistication of its visuals, which join God of War 2 as a final-days showcase of what the PS2 can do. Its aesthetics become of course more subjective, and here again is where Tomb Raider fans can unite in appreciation of what is the series at its best. There are moments of pause, forcing you to soak in the awe of the surroundings.

Moving around in this exotic playpen is awfully advanced when you look back to the original Tomb Raider for reference. Much of Lara's movement extends from Legend, with her newly agile controls granting much more dynamic jumping, climbing, swinging and combat. A few new techniques add to the fun, like the slow-mo adrenaline shot and using the grappling hook to run across surfaces when locked into a safety point. The story, which deals with Lara searching for the valuable Scion, has been substantially beefed up, but thankfully, this doesn't mean Lara has her tech team yelling in her ear and adding the Hollywood element to the game—a big blemish on the lovely face of Legend. Obviously some things needed changing for this remake, but by staying true to the glory of the past while merging with the best of what modern gaming has to offer, Tomb Raider: Anniversary is a real gift for fans—and required gaming for new players in search of adventure.

"There are moments of pause, forcing you to soak in the awe of the surroundings."

Tomb Raider: Anniversary score **9.0**

+	The magic of the original delivered in a stunningly reimagined package
–	I want it in HD!

System(s)	PS2
Developer	Crystal Dynamics
Publisher	Eidos
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May
ESRB Rating	Teen

Pirates of the Caribbean At World's End

Jack Sparrow returns...

words Brady Fiechter

Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End creates such a spirited, visually delightful world that's so inviting to explore, even the most obvious and severe flaws don't break its spell. But those flaws do constantly weigh on the experience, and you just can't ignore the biggest of them all: the mostly ponderous and monotonous action.

The game is mechanical and uninspired in its display of treasure and item collection, and there's a slight coat of inelegance that distorts the richness of presentation, but the real blow comes from having to deal with the fact that your fingers are so sore from pounding out the exact same button combinations for the thousandth time. This shallow simplicity of combat isn't so numbing because of the ease of play as it is for the lack of satisfaction. A game like, say, God of War can be approached with little technique, but every blow hits you in the gut; here, the sluggish control—too often throughout the game you have to accept a delay as the spotty animation plays out—keeps you constantly struggling to get fully immersed into the gameplay. When the occasional instant kill move is required, a nice shot of adrenaline kicks in, but that's about the only time the action gets any props.

For a game that is incessantly throwing groups of enemies in your face, you'd think the tedium of their disposal would render Pirates of the Caribbean a wash.

"Pirates of the Caribbean: At World's End creates such a spirited, visually delightful world..."

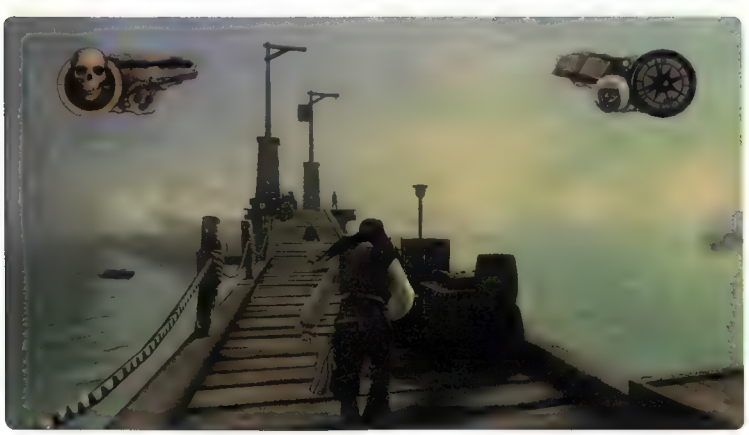
But among the saving graces is the high energy of the scenes, which engage with the kind of raucous imagination that fuels the movies on which the game is drawn. There's an adventurous quality to the game too, which takes you up mast heads of giant pirate ships and down ropes into the bowels below, across building tops for a jump and shimmy to the next ledge, through the sand-swept desert and deadly native-infested jungle. It's all presented with just enough touch of artistry and dazzle to reward putting up with the persistent lack of execution.

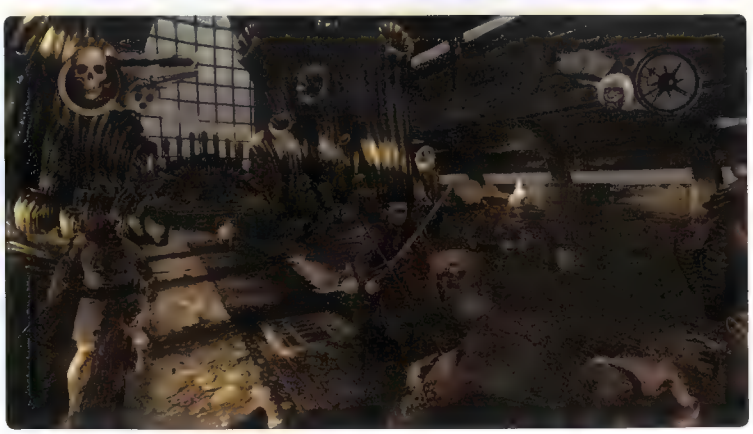
As games become more ambitious works with so many more factors playing in to their effect, Pirates of the Caribbean was an oddly enjoyable experience for me. There are a lot of games out there that will be much better received and demonstrate sounder core design, yet those games in the end didn't entertain me like this one.

Pirates of the Caribbean score **7.0**

+	Looks very pretty; the assets from the movie obviously help. Nice variety of play.
–	The swordplay is monotonous and lacks impact. Kind of clunky.

System(s)	Xbox 360
Developer	Eurocom
Publisher	Disney Interactive
Online/Multi	NA
Available	June
ESRB Rating	T



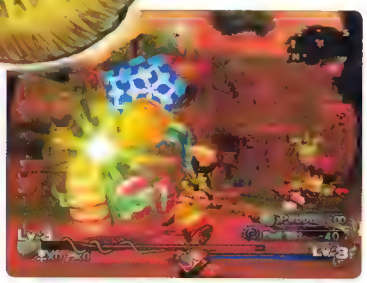


Dawn of Mana

One small step for Havok-based action, one giant leap for Seiken Densetsu

words Dave Halverson

Get over here!



Series creator Koichi Ishii felt that the addition of Havok engine physics to the Seiken Densetsu formula was so dramatic that it deserved to be christened the 4th installment in the series—the first numbered sequel in eleven years. Series die-hards might argue that the opposite should apply but Koichi is proud of the first 3D version, which in his words epitomizes what makes action and adventure fun—the simple pleasures of exploring and experiencing a new world.

The game's drastic overhaul from a party-driven action-RPG, complete with all of the traditional accoutrements, to a single character action game is key in whether or not it's for you, depending on how much (or little) you feel Seiken Densetsu needed to change. With so many Mana games out there is this new direction on console such a bad thing? I say, bring it on PS3 style. 2D Mana can and will thrive on mobile systems, so why not take the series in a new direction on console? The only question is whether or not this is the proper course.

> "Dawn isn't a traditional adventure by any stretch of the imagination."

Dawn isn't a traditional adventure by any stretch of the imagination. It's more like a massive 3D puzzle-action game riding on a peculiar play mechanic supported by the usual fairytale story and unparalleled character design Square Enix is famous for. As the game evolves, the gorgeous environments (the PS2 never ceases to amaze me) become larger and trickier to navigate, requiring the player to not only master the terrain but systematically root out a relentless enemy, eliminating both ranged and ground-based attackers by stunning them with Keldric's magical arm or knocking items into them like a massive game of 3D pool. Once stunned even the toughest enemies go down without a fight, so objects strewn about each environment must be used wisely in order to successfully navigate each area. Clever bosses and story arcs intervene to create a wonderful overall experience—provided you take to the game's Havok-based hook. Generally speaking, if you like exploration, platforming, physics-based action and a good puzzle, this is as fresh an action-adventure as you're going to find, and the character designs are nothing short of perfection. In other words, you're gonna love it. If on the other hand you're looking for a Square Enix-bred action-RPG... handhelds, aisle 4.

Dawn of Mana — score **8.0**

+	Huge maps filled with mystery, great AI, beautiful character and world design, engaging story, fresh play mechanics
–	Enemies explode in a hail of casino chips and candy (very odd) and if you don't like the action, you're in trouble.

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Square Enix
Publisher	Square Enix
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May 22
ESRB Rating	T

Mortal Kombat: Armageddon

score 5.0

Can we Fatality these ports please?

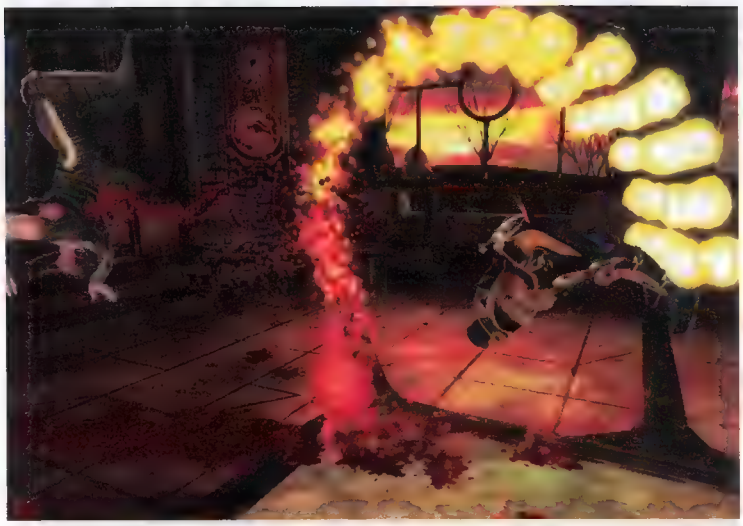
words Heather Campbell

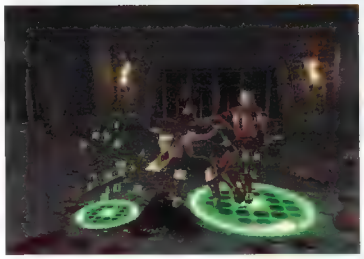
System(s)	Nintendo Wii	Multi	2-player
Developer	Midway	Available	Now
Publisher	Midway	ESRB Rating	M

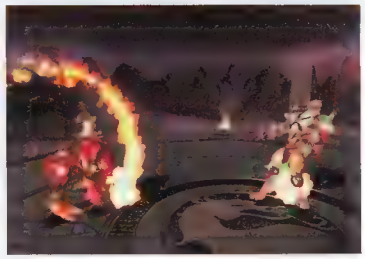
I know there's a quality fighter buried in Mortal Kombat: Armageddon (for the Wii), but I had to go buy a new controller to find it. As much hype as the gesture system has generated, using the Wiimote to play a fighting game designed for a standard interface just doesn't work. And with punches and kicks mapped out to the D-pad, MK:A isn't just clumsy, it's downright counterintuitive.

And as someone who plays a lot of fighting games, I hate the idea of actually blaming the controller for a missed move. Guess what? There's no way to avoid it in Mortal Kombat Wii Edition. Often, moves will go ignored by the Wii, even as you repeat them over and over again in training mode. Add the frenzy of a live match, and there's no way you can guarantee a flawless victory, regardless of which of the 62 fighters you choose. Frankly, I think the developers know this ... which is why they've included the option to play with the Classic Controller or a Gamecube Controller. It's not just for preference, it's an insurance policy.

Mortal Kombat fans will enjoy the variety of game modes, and the audacious number of characters, but they'll no doubt enjoy them most without a Wiimote.







We knew Shaolin Monks was too good to be true...

Eureka Seven Vol. 2: The New Vision

score 5.0

When episodic gaming goes wrong

words Casey Loe

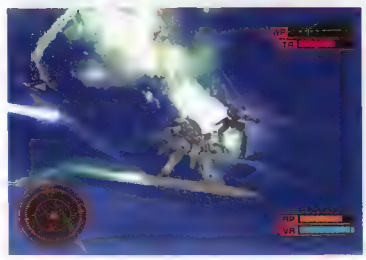
System(s)	PlayStation 2	Multi	None
Developer	Namco-Bandai	Available	Now
Publisher	Namco-Bandai	ESRB Rating	Teen

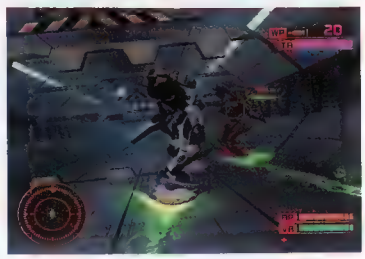
Eureka Seven was a fun enough diversion for fans of the series, but its repetitive play mechanics and trite storyline hardly left anyone clamoring for more. But a business plan is a business plan, so Namco-Bandai cranked out a second volume anyway.

Eureka Seven introduces one new game mode, in which LFOs (mechs) use lifting boards to engage in aerial combat. If you can puzzle out the controls you'll have a pretty good time with it, at least for the first several battles. Sadly, the same cannot be said for the game's other modes: the surface LFO battles and lifting races are taken straight from the original with few modifications, and anyone who played through Volume 1 should be able to clear them in their sleep.

Instead, the developers have focused most of the improvements on the game's event scenes. They are now entirely voiced, set in a wider variety of locations, and feature a lot more action and camera movement. It's a noble effort, but the production values still aren't high enough to make me care about the forgettable adventures and tepid romance of heroes Sumner and Ruri. This sequel simply didn't need to happen.

"Eureka Seven introduces one new game mode..."





Heroes of Mana

No big Secret

words Heather Campbell

"Director Kenichi Ishii has wanted to make this game since he saw the DS."

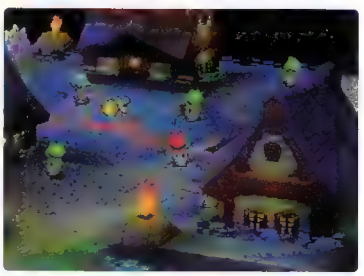
What would you rather have: a re-released Secret of Mana for the DS, or an all-new real time strategy game for the system, set in the world of Mana? Yeah, that's my answer, too. Despite my growing frustration with the lack of Secret of Mana ports (c'mon Square-Enix: we've got 300 versions of Final Fantasy 1, and only one legal way to play the SNES title!), I was happily impressed by the early version of Heroes of Mana for Nintendo's touch-screen portable.

Director Kenichi Ishii has wanted to make this game since he saw the DS. I, myself, am not well versed in RTS games myself, and didn't realize until the demo how perfect the system is for an RTS game. Drawn in by the familiar characters and stunning three-dimensional maps, I found myself quickly adapting to the circle-and-drag gameplay, and the language of RTS games was made simpler by the obvious hierarchy between in-game elements. Make Rabites gather resources, build different types of combat units in your airship, and deploy them against hordes of enemies. An example of really using the specific qualities of the system its published on, Heroes of Mana simply wouldn't be as fun without the stylus. This is a game made for the DS, in every way.

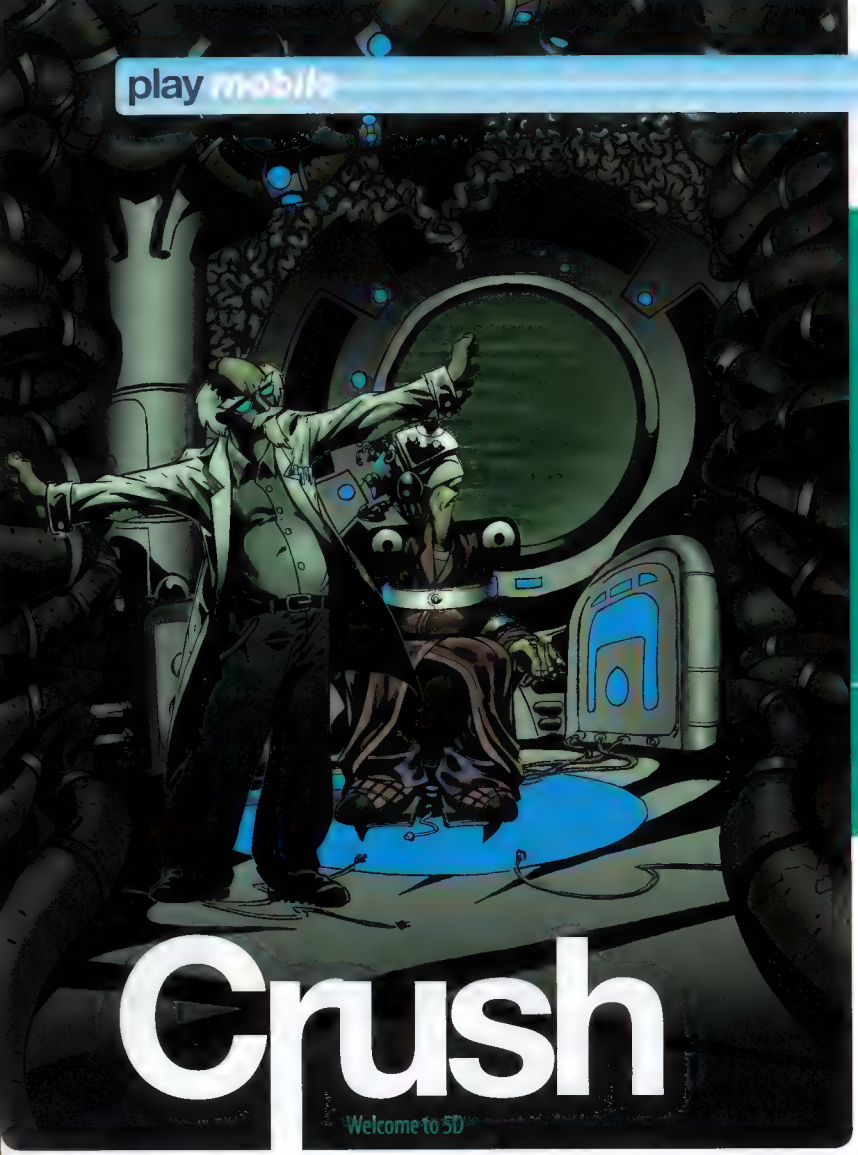
Definitely one of the prettier DS games...

Heroes of Mana tells the story of Roget, a warrior on an airship which is shot down at the beginning of the tale. As Roget discovers the true motives of the country for which he flies, he has to decide which side he'll take in an all-out war. Though Roget doesn't power up in a traditional RPG way, new abilities are unlocked as the game progresses, like the power of summoned monsters. These beasts are key to turning the tide of battle, and Ishii's company made clear that it was a great way to come back from a battle you're losing against a friend.

Oh, right. There's wireless play available. Taking on the director of the game, I promptly got destroyed. Still, the learning curve is not steep, and I never felt that overwhelmed, even on my first head-to-head battle. Perhaps, once new maps are available, it would be worth taking on Ishii again ... though he's probably had more time to practice than I have.



Heroes of Mana	
System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Brownie Brown
Publisher	Square-Enix, USA
Online/Multi	Vs. Wireless
Available	TBA (Summer 2007)



Crush

Welcome to 5D

Danny arrives at the Funfair... Wakey, wakey!

"Addicting like crack, yes; easy—no."

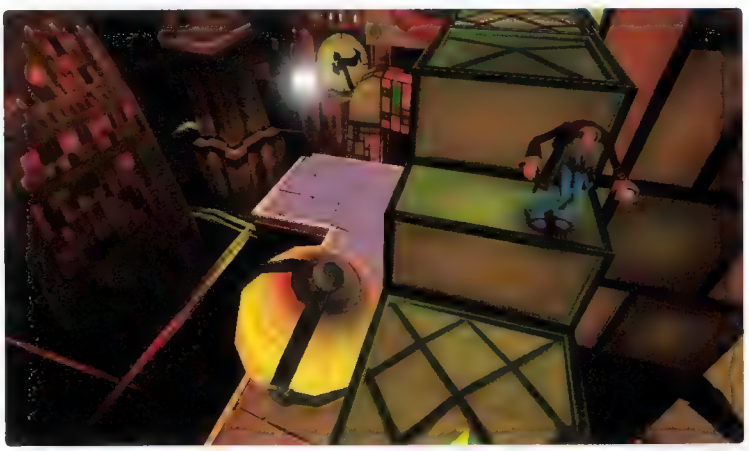
Crush	score
+	Innovative, addicting gameplay, great graphics and world design, cool lead character.
–	Serious puzzle gamers only (hard game alert). More environments would be nice.
System(s)	PSP
Developer	Kuju Entertainment
Publisher	Sega of America
Online/Multi	NA
Available	May 29
ESRB Rating	E 10+

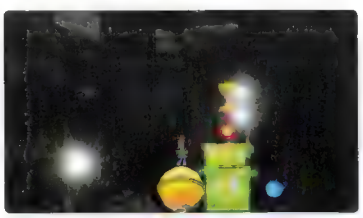
words Dave Halverson

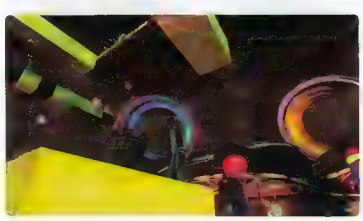
It's a fact: the best puzzle games are character driven. Zoom!, Loco Roco, Frantix, Q-Bert, Frogger...all of the best games feature a being of some sort. Add Crush to that illustrious list, somewhere way at the top. Someone had a brilliant idea...

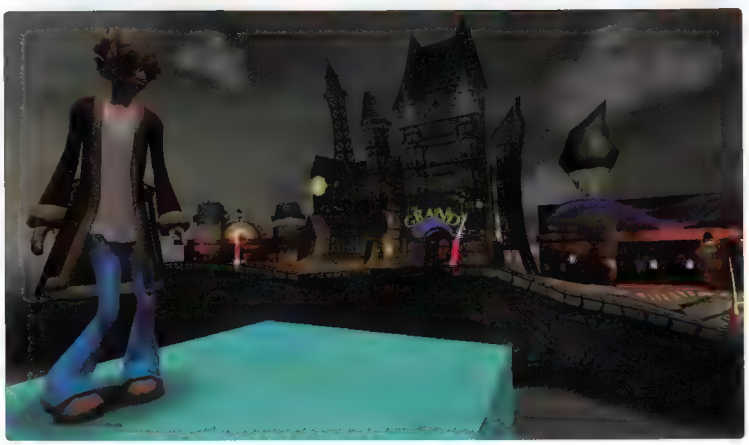
In Crush you play the patient (Danny), so stricken with insomnia that you find yourself in the laboratory of a mad scientist with his crazy contraption (C.R.U.S.H.) strapped to your head. The idea is to make your way through your various psychoses by "crushing" your way to clarity, navigating 3D constructs that manifest themselves as familiar places in your mind's eye.

The crux of the game is to position yourself correctly in 3D to crush yourself into 2D and make your way around the game's geometric constructs. Sound easy? Addicting like crack, yes; easy—no. The trick is turning the puzzle in the proper direction to crush your way around each floating construct, capturing various prizes and spheres that numerically open the portal out. Danny can jump, duck, and interact with objects to get things done, as the levels become increasingly more perplexing. You begin with simple navigation, but soon find yourself dealing with all manner of figments from Danny's fractured imagination from giant cockroaches to tentacles and beyond. To keep you from totally freaking out, the good doctor is with you every step of the way via Crush's cool graphic novel-style story, and a generous safety net keeps you from too many do-overs and loading screens. Crush delivers in every sense of the word: originality, playability, and visuals—it's easily among the prettiest puzzle games I've ever seen—and will keep your PSP off the charger for many a sleepless night.









Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Trials and Tribulations

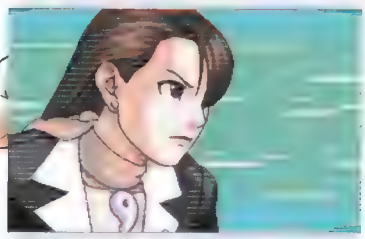
System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	Capcom	**Available**	September
Publisher	Capcom	**ESRB Rating**	Teen

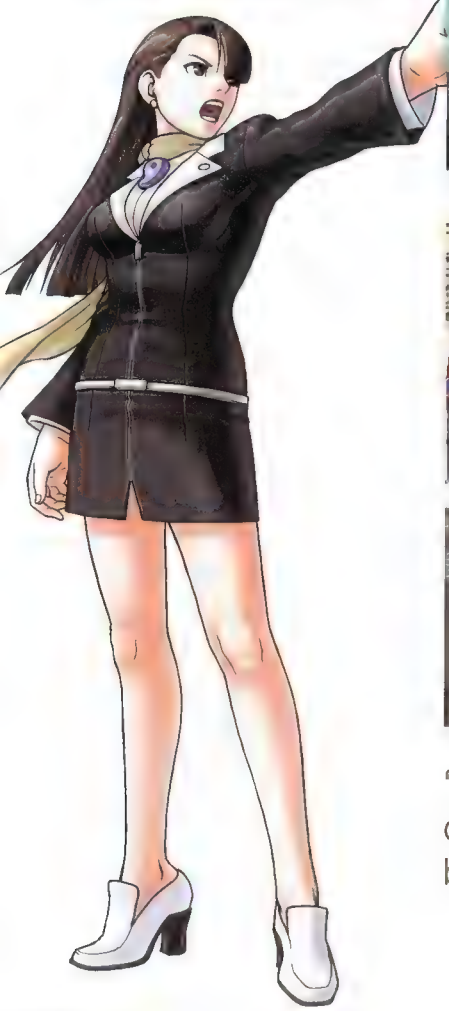
Few could have imagined that a game featuring a spiky-haired attorney would be so popular as to warrant not one, but two sequels. Yet the goofy Nintendo DS adventure Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney captured game fans' hearts and minds.

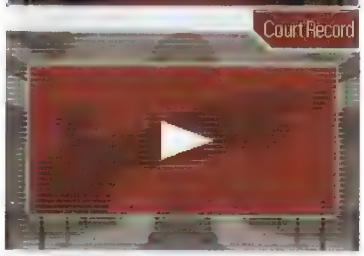
Phoenix Wright Ace Attorney: Trials and Tribulations will wrap the Phoenix Wright trilogy in grand fashion with five new courtroom battles. This time around players get to take the part of Phoenix Wright and his now-deceased mentor, Mia Fey.

Little is actually known about Trials and Tribulations save for the fact that it introduces an all-new nemesis in the mysterious Godlot. The "psyche lock" system, wherein Wright must question witnesses to break down their stories in order to get them to reveal hidden truths, makes its return from Justice for All, the previous game in the series. Oh, and it's a sure bet the sequences starring Mia Fey in the lead role all take place in the past, when the character still had a pulse.

As ever, the game's great draw is in its mind-bending play wherein Wright must collect clues in the investigation phase and build a case in the courtroom. And, frankly, the verdict is: Waiting for this one to see release sucks real hard. **Greg Orlando**







"...the game's great draw is in its mind-bending play..."

Final Fantasy Anniversary Edition

score 4

System(s)	PSP	**Multi**	None
Developer	Square-Enix	**Available**	June 26
Publisher	Square-Enix	**ESRB Rating**	Everyone

Square has remade Final Fantasy so many times that at this point they're actually remaking the remakes. Final Fantasy Anniversary Edition is based not on the NES original but on the Dawn of Souls remake for GBA, which updated the magic system to use MP (instead of the D&D-esque spell-per-level system) and sharply reduced the difficulty. Dawn of Souls also offered a series of four new dungeons, to which Anniversary Edition has added a fifth. The music and CG scenes seem to be lifted from the PlayStation remake (Final Fantasy Origins), leaving redrawn sprites and battle backgrounds as the only true upgrade in this version. At least those sprites look good, but the lack of animation and the shoddy overworld map still leave the game looking severely dated.

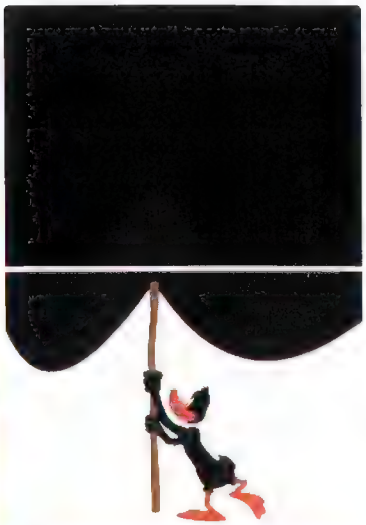
I have mixed feelings about basing this version so heavily on Dawn of Souls. There's no denying that updating the magic system and replacing the early game grinding with optional, challenging late-game dungeons makes Final Fantasy a more entertaining game. But the lack of an option to select the original parameters is galling, especially in a so-called "Anniversary Edition." Is the point to celebrate Final Fantasy 20th birthday, or Dawn of Souls' 3rd?

My feelings are a lot less mixed about the fact that the Anniversary project is basically just a PSP port of Dawn of Souls with the two games sold separately. $60 for a slightly enhanced version of a three-year old Game Boy Advance game? Happy anniversary, Final Fantasy fans! **Casey Loe**

Looney Tunes: Duck Amok

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	WayForward Technologies	**Available**	Fall
Publisher	Warner Bros. Int.	**ESRB Rating**	E

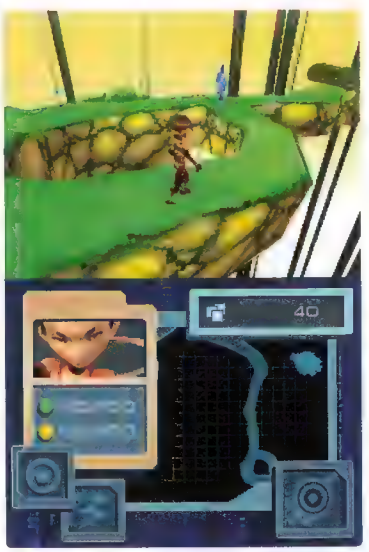
Looney Tunes games—once a staple of the character action genre—have been MIA for the most part since the heyday of 16-bit when games like Taz-Mania and Bugs Bunny Rabbit Rampage ruled the day. Well Doc, they're back, with two great games dropping side by side this fall: Acme Arsenal (which looks absolutely amazing) for console and Duck Amok for the DS. It may not look like much on the printed page but be warned, once you see and hear this one in action there's no turning back. The general idea is to piss-off Daffy via assorted pratfalls and mini-games inspired by choice vignettes, such as the infamous piano duel between Daffy and Bugs. The level of interactivity is what makes the game shine. Daffy's animation and reactions make you feel like he's alive and stuck in your DS and the array of mini-games and challenges are as hilarious as they are fun. This is what the DS was built for. **Dave Halverson**

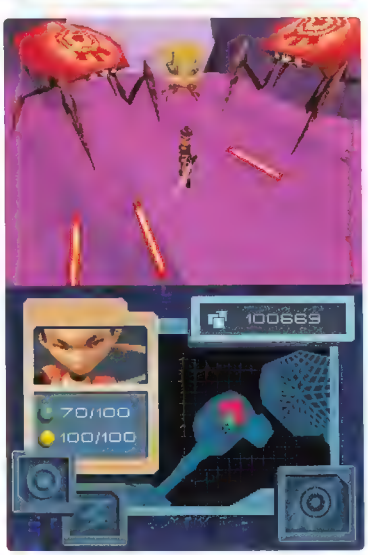


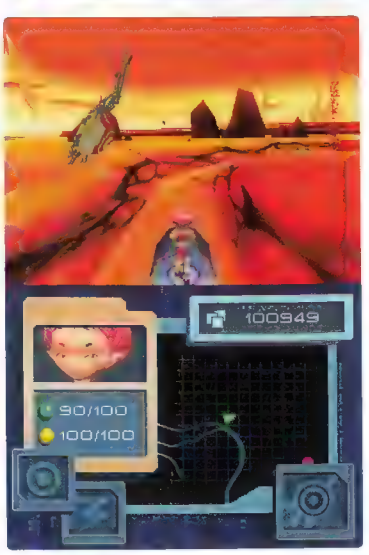
Code Lyoko

System(s)	Nintendo DS	**Multi**	NA
Developer	DC Studios	**Available**	May 15
Publisher	The Game Factory	**ESRB Rating**	10+

Throngs of pre-teens can breathe a sigh of relief this May when Code Lyoko's four über students leap into action on the DS. Based on the freakishly designed French cartoon (those are some BIG foreheads) heading into its fourth season on Cartoon Network, the game combines Monkey Island-like 2D role-playing elements in the "real" world with 3D action in the virtual belly of Lyoko, utilizing the unique strengths of all four main characters—Aelita, Ulrich, Yumi, and Odd --as they wrestle for dominion with the digital entity X.A.N.A., who's taken over the super computer that controls Lyoko, a virtual domain it uses to attack the real world. Or something like that…it's complicated. The real world gameplay in Lyoko, while religious to the show and great looking, is beset by dodgy navigation until you memorize the campus, and the action is fairly pedestrian in execution although deeply rooted in the series' mythos, especially as you forage "Data Bits" used for purchasing various items, weapons, and armor.
To put it bluntly, which is all I have space for, the game's aspirations are laser beamed towards its loyal fan base and in that capacity it delivers with flying colors. You've got 40 Towers to find; better get to it. **Dave Halverson**







Aedis Eclipse: Generation of Chaos

score 7.0

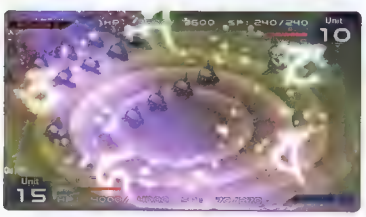
System(s)	PSP	Multi	NA
Developer	Idea Factory	Available	April 24
Publisher	NIS America	ESRB Rating	E 10+

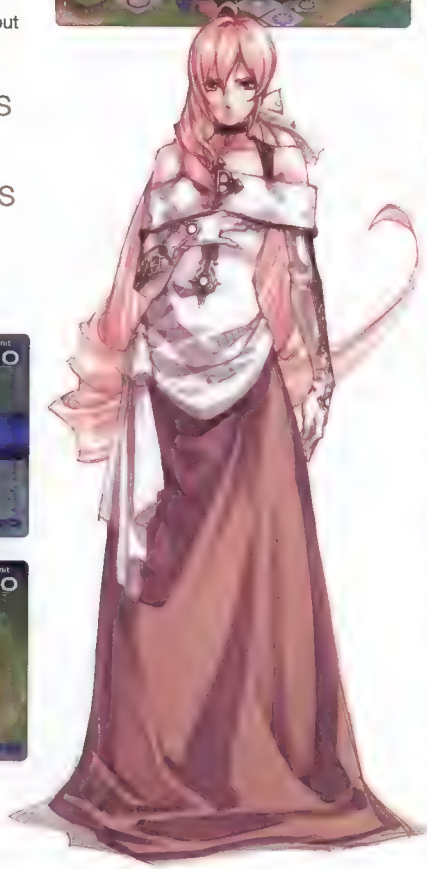
Aedis Eclipse has the shine and sparkle of a great game, and the battle system of a bad one. I love the character art, and the costumes, and the art design of the game, but boy is this strategy RPG a little hard on the hands. With an obdurate menu system and very little tutorial, Generation of Chaos throws you in and expects you to learn as you go.

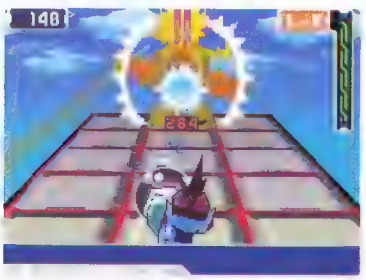
Which would be fine, if the game wasn't so deep. But this is a difficult game for hardcore SRPG players, who will want to maximize their strategies … and won't really know how to do it. Even starting your game in the beginner's "Lower World," it's hard to know what you need and when.

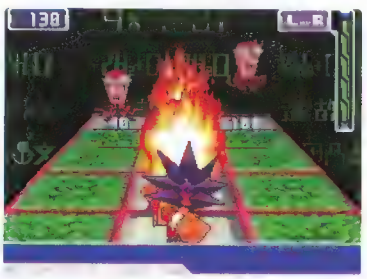
Finally, it's a shame that the story is so straightforward, too. Three conflicts break out across three planes of existence – Divine, Upper, and Lower. Taking on either the war between angels and demons, or the story of a young knight seeking justice, or the out-of-place schoolboy tossed into battle, the three stories give replayability to a title that needs it. It's gonna take you a few rounds to figure out how to play, anyway. **Heather Campbell**

"...Generation of Chaos throws you in and expects you to learn as you go."









Mega Man Star Force

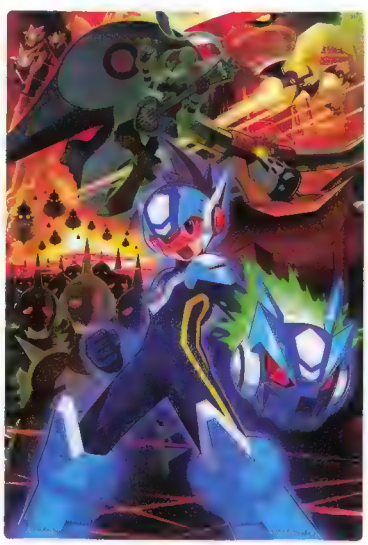
System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	WiFi "Brother Band"
Developer	Capcom	Available	August
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Pardon the horrible and boorish cliché, but the Star Force is strong with this one.

The action role-playing game Mega Man Star Force returns Capcom's beloved robot hero to the Nintendo DS as part of a one-two punch (along with the DS title Mega Man ZX Advent) to celebrate the character's 20th birthday.

Force is an action role-playing game that comes in three separate versions called Pegasus, Leo, and Dragon, with each having its own distinct enemies and special battle cards that are used to power attacks. The Pegasus focuses on ice powers, the Leo concentrates on fire attacks, and the Dragon utilizes the forces of nature.

Players explore the game world as a human, but jump into a virtual world as Mega Man for the real-time combat. When it comes time to fight, Mega Man and his foe meet on a three-by-five square grid and cast spells and spit out attacks at one another in real-time. A neat feature allows players, via the DS' WiFi, to recruit up to six friends to serve as "brothers" in the game's brother band feature. Players can access their brothers' cards to bolster their character's strength and create new attacks. **Greg Orlando**



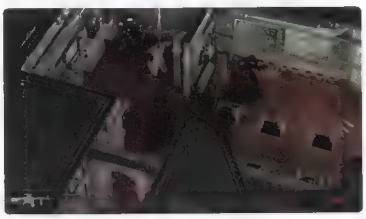
SWAT: Target Liberty

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	NA
Developer	3G Studios	Available	May 30, 2007
Publisher	Sierra	ESRB Rating	Teen

SWAT: Target Liberty drops players in the role of a SWAT (special weapons and tactics) team commander. Together with two A.I.-controlled allies, players must protect and serve—and obey the rules, or else.

SWAT members have to call out to potential suspects and then restrain them. In Liberty, this means the good guys still have to be cuffed, and the bad guys shouldn't instantly be blasted. Players can opt to do the cuffing of compliant suspects themselves or select a team member and do the old point-and-click to command him to do the dirty work. When a suspect resists, it's time to put them down, with nonlethal techniques such as tear gas the more preferred route—at least by SWAT team members in the real world.

As such, the game emphasizes slow, careful play. Clearing a room isn't as simple as busting through a door, punching a few slugs in Johnny Scumbucket, and relaxing with an ice-cold beer. Sure, there will be shootouts and tense, first-person perspective hostage scenarios, but there's also a lot of peering under doors and, astoundingly, thinking involved. **Greg Orlando**



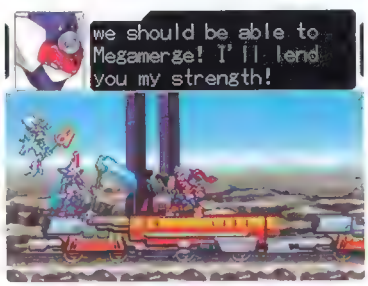
"When a suspect resists, it's time to put them down..."

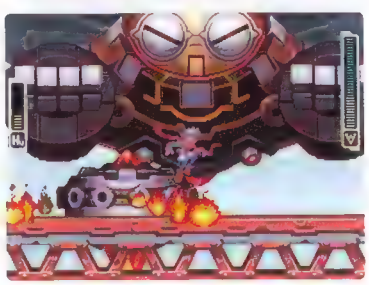
Mega Man ZX Advent

System(s)	Nintendo DS	Multi	2 player co-op
Developer	Capcom	Available	October
Publisher	Capcom	ESRB Rating	E 10+

Happy birthday, Mega Man. To celebrate the robot's 20 years of game heroism, Capcom plans to release Mega Man ZX Advent, a follow-up to the first Mega Man platformer to make it to the Nintendo DS.

With the run-and-gun platformer Advent, players can control heroes Grey or Ash and jump, crawl, and blast their way through a series of colorful side-scrolling worlds. The game's great hook is that players can use the mysterious substance known as Biometal to become defeated foes. Initially, players can access a straightforward laser blast and homing beam, but can trade up to characters with superior speed, stamina, fire-shooting abilities, or agility. Each form, and there are 13 in total (not including the basic human form) has its own powers and abilities, meaning Advent offers a lot of freedom to its players to tackle the game's obstacles in a variety of ways. Players can shift back and forth between the various forms by tapping on an icon at the bottom of the DS' touch screen, and clever shifting, Capcom says, will allow for the exploration of new areas and collection of hidden items.





Oh, and two-man cooperative play and head-to-head action only sweeten the deal. **Greg Orlando**

"The game's great hook is that players can use the mysterious substance known as Biometal..."

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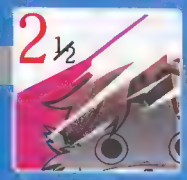
Nick Des Barres



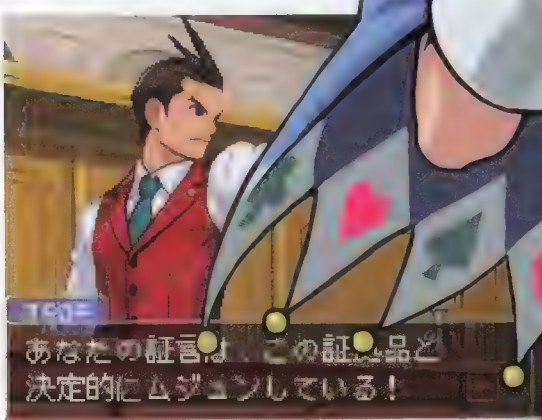
Ace Attorney 4

(Gyakuten Saiban 4)

words Dai Kohama and Nick Des Barres

You should consider yourselves lucky. The Ace Attorney bug may only recently have bit you, but over here in Japan the first game in the series came out in 2001. We've had to wait a painfully long time between installments, but you get them within the span of months. Ace Attorney 3: Trials and Tribulations (original Japanese version 2004) has recently been announced for a fall release in America, and take it from me: It's the best installment in the series you'll play yet.

But sometime after that, perhaps in the spring or summer of 2008, you're going to get an *even better* game. I didn't think it was going to be possible for Takumi Shu and his team to outdo themselves yet again, resurrecting a formula now four games old and presenting it a new and refreshing way. And yet, that is exactly what they have accomplished here, dramatically retooling the series by setting it seven years after the events of Gyakuten Saiban 3 ("Turnabout Trials," Japanese name for the series), with an almost all-new cast. Don't worry; I wouldn't dare spoil the



events in the ongoing series narrative, as you've still got a ways to go with Phoenix Wright (Ryuichi Naruhodo in Japan) before you meet the new hero, young and brash Hosuke Odoroki.

Ace Attorney 4 is a *total* series reboot, and that means more than just a new character and future setting. It would be a complete disservice to fans everywhere to explain just what that means, but I can tell you things are going to get *dramatically* shook up in the series' quirky world of colorful characters and three-day criminal trials: the implications as to exactly what happened during those missing seven years are staggering. There. I hope that got your attention, because it's all I'm going to say about the story. Instead, I'm going to talk about the gameplay.

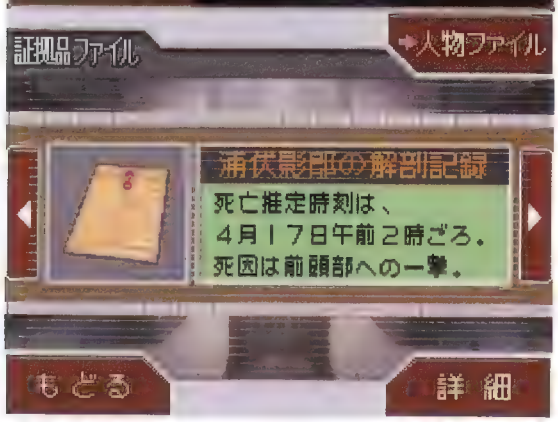
One of the most common complaints leveled against the Ace Attorney series is that it often seems like each new installment is more of a "mission pack" than a new game, with the main gameplay experience remaining essentially unchanged. While the pattern of investigation-trial-investigation of course remains intact, 4 mixes things up with new systems in both phases of gameplay. During investigation, you're sometimes joined by Ema Skye (Akane Hozuki), the young CSI wannabe from Chapter 5 of the original Phoenix Wright. Now all grown up and with plenty of fancy new tools, she'll help you perform various touchpen-controlled forensics tasks like pouring plaster casts and dusting for fingerprints.

The new trial gameplay system is called "Minuku" ("see through") in Japanese, and functions somewhat like the "Psycho-Lock" system from part 2: Using the touchpen (and the very mysterious bracelet Odoroki wears on his left arm), you'll be able to focus in on subtle, involuntary physical changes in witnesses that occur when they obfuscate the truth, allowing you to call out otherwise impenetrable lies; call it a human lie detector. With the addition of these two new minigame-like gameplay aspects, Ace Attorney 4 feels much more like *you* are working to solving mysteries and advance the plot, rather than having your hand held.

The new systems add much to the core Ace Attorney gameplay, but what makes this game a 9.5–and I'm not even kidding–are the story and characters. Capcom have completely mastered the art of storytelling

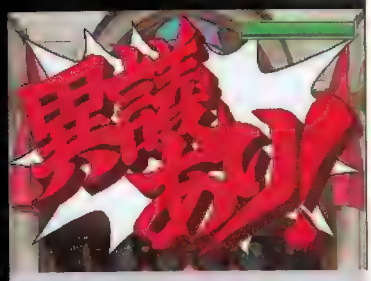
> I didn't think it was going to be possible for Takumi Shu and his team to outdo themselves yet again, resurrecting a formula now four games old and presenting it a new and refreshing way."

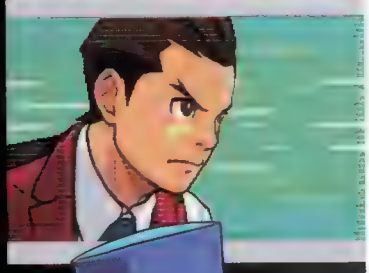
The new "Minuku" (literally "see through") system allows hero Hosuke Odoroki to focus on and spot subtle, involuntary physical changes in witnesses to catch them in lies.



Hosuke Odoroki

Never seen without his trademark spiffy red suit, the 22-year-old rookie attorney Hosuke Odoroki stands in the same position his predecessor Ryuichi Naruhodo (Phoenix Wright) did many years before. Somewhat more brash and hot-blooded than Naruhodo but just as affable, he too possesses the potential to become a legendary defense attorney. And there's something about that strange bracelet he wears...





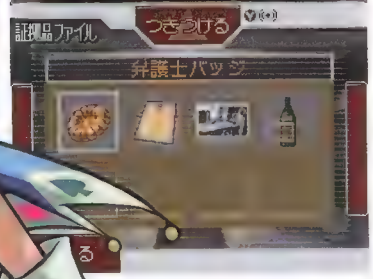
in this format now, but far from resting on their laurels they completely explode convention with a giant twist that occurs right in the middle of Chapter 1. It's this niggling bit of information that prevents us from expounding upon the plot, but rest assured you're going to be in for one hell of a ride. Oh, and did I mention your first client, on trial for murder, is none other than a man named Phoenix Wright?

Yeah. That's just how Ace Attorney 4 rolls. Whatever you're expecting, expect more. We may have jumped the gun a little on this review, but the fourth iteration of this groundbreaking series is just so awesome we needed you to know about it. As fantastic as part 3 is–and it is, believe me–I was worried Capcom would be treading water for this installment. While not as much as a paradigm shift in terms of gameplay, Ace Attorney can be compared quite favorably to Resident Evil 4: On the third sequel, Capcom knocked it out of the park.

Gyakuten Saiban 4 — score **9.5**

+	The peak "aha!" experience Ace Attorney provides while solving a mystery is unmatched
–	Finding time for things such as sustenance and sleep while playing

System(s)	Nintendo DS
Developer	Capcom
Publisher	Capcom
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US



Ace Attorney 4 expands on the investigative forensics features first introduced in the fifth chapter of the original Phoenix Wright, adding the ability to, among other things, pour plastic casts.

The Limited Edition

Like many other games in Japan, Gyakuten Saiban 4 received an extremely fancy special edition, shipping in a massive box lined with faux red silk (!). *Unlike* many other games, the limited box came with a second piece of DS software completely separate from the main game: "Gyakuten Saiban Jiten," an interactive database full of browsable case synopses, character and background artwork, music, and a fantastically detailed encyclopedia collecting information from all four previous games in the series. Rounding out the package is a booklet featuring art and rough character designs from the making of GS4, like the early version of Kirihito shown here. One can only hope Capcom finds some way to bring this bonus game to the US for the eventual release of Ace Attorney 4.

Minuki

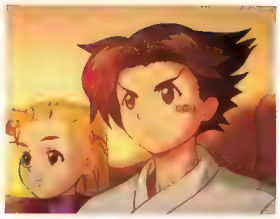
15-year old Minuki is an inscrutable mystery. She claims to be a magician, on a journey to become a great sorceress. What's her connection to Odoroki? How will she help him in his investigations? Will she pull a rabbit out of her hat? Will she saw him in half? Does she take over the companion role held by Mayoi Ayasato (Maya Fey) in the original trilogy? Who knows? Minuki just smiles back enigmatically, not revealing her secrets.

Kirihito Garyu

Rookie Odoroki's elder in every way, Kirihito Garyu is a strict and logical man, but far from an unkind one. The go-to veteran defense attorney in Odoroki's day, he'll oversee the young man's first court case, much as Naruhodo's mentor Chihiro Ayasato (Mia Fey) did long ago. As the game progresses, players will learn his identical twin brother has an even larger role to play in the courtroom drama of Gyakuten Saiban 4.

Kenichi, History's Strongest Disciple

Capcom's first all-new fighting game in six years



words Nick Des Barres

In Japan, Capcom marks all their game covers with a genre indication–a custom logo that identifies what type of game you can expect within. The release of Kenichi, History's Strongest Disciple marks the first time I've seen the legendary "VS FIGHTING" crest on an all-new game since 2001. I can't deny I got a little misty upon opening the package, reminiscing about the many, many times I'd laid eyes on the little logo over the years, and how much it meant to me.

You see, I was the kind of guy who scrounged and saved to buy the arcade PCBs for Capcom fighting games the instant they came out. The culture of Capcom fighters essentially dominated my gaming life for the better part of a decade. I feel I know the genre, and especially the works of Capcom, very well. Does Kenichi live up to the pedigree of the genre Capcom created? In two simple words: Not really. I was probably a fool for getting my hopes up so high, but the allure of that little yellow brand on the cover was great.

Kenichi is based on a manga (and recently anime) of the same name by Shun Matsuena, a series that itself borrows heavily from Capcom's fighting game history in its design and story. Capcom has, in the past, taken other comic licenses (Marvel, Jojo's Bizarre Adventure) and crafted all-time classics from them, so that fact alone shouldn't make one nervous. Unfortunately, Kenichi displays none of Capcom's mid-90s shoot-for-the-moon attitude and ultimately turns into a standard latter-day licensed affair along the lines of a recent Naruto or Dragon Ball: Solid and entertaining, but not something anyone but a serious fan of the original work will remember a year later.

That's the key difference. Capcom's fighters based on existing works used to be games first, and licenses second. Kenichi is squarely the latter, with the core game experience being not the thrill of human-on-human competition, but rather an (admittedly well-done) one-player story mode aimed directly at the fan. You begin the game with a selection of only two characters, unlocking a total of thirteen as you progress though a scenario presented in the fashion of a fully-voiced digital comic, interspersed here and there with versus battles and amusing training mini-games. This may be genuinely entertaining, encapsulating the manga's story fairly well and gradually familiarizing the player with the game's combat system, but it lasts all of four hours.

One can't but help feel the game is over after seeing the credits roll, but this is ostensibly where Kenichi really begins, with all characters unlocked. The combat itself is very anime-lite, and can be compared to one million Naruto games. Speaking in fighting game terminology, it's very much a fusion of Tekken-style button strings and standard Capcom command-based special moves, with Dead Or Alive-esque counters thrown in for good measure. To make the sampling of legacy fighters complete, each character comes in two SNK-style flavors: defensive and offensive, both providing a very different play experience. I'd go into more detail if I had the room, but know that everything is very Japanese, very solid, and generally unimpeachable.

It's just uninspired, and that's the problem. I went into Kenichi hoping for the now almost-mythic Capcom Fighting Game, and what I got was a good licensed brawler with decent cel-shaded graphics, again comparable to any recent Naruto game. Not bad by any means, but certainly not what I was looking for. Fans of the manga (and anime, though the character designs are a bit different) will certainly be more than pleased, but don't have any illusions. The VS FIGHTING mark may still be there, but the soul is long gone.

"It's just uninspired, and that's the problem. I went into Kenichi hoping for the now almost-mythic Capcom Fighting Game, and what I got was a good licensed brawler."

Kenichi, History's Strongest Disciple — score 7.0

\+ Solid 2-D/3-D fighting hybrid, entertaining single-player features

– Mediocre visuals

System(s)	PlayStation 2
Developer	Capcom/8ing
Publisher	Capcom
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

Furu Furu Park

Wiimote + Drugged-out Japanese anime madness = Win

I have a confession to make. I'm not completely feeling the Wiimote just yet. I recognize its potential, but nothing to date has convinced me to give up my DualShock. Playing Wii Sports or WarioWare with friends can be an absolute blast, but ultimately the experience is best enjoyed in short, bite-size bursts, and sitting alone at home flailing my arms about playing one-minute mini-games, however fun it may be, just makes me feel hollow inside. Hey, I'm sure my personal single-player killer app will arrive *eventually*...it just hasn't yet.

I'll tell you what, though: Furu Furu Park from Taito came damn close, and even as I write these words I'm still having a little trouble believing it. Why? On the surface, Furu Furu ("Shake Shake") is just a mini-game collection, like so many other Wii titles past and future. The difference–and this is key–is that it's a mini-game collection that presents a compelling, lengthy, fully fleshed-out single-player experience.

"On the surface, Furu Furu is just a mini-game collection. The difference–and this is key–is that it's a mini-game collection that presents a compelling, fully fleshed-out single-player experience."

Although Furu Furu does offer two-person competitive play, the all-beef patty (perhaps I should say the umeboshi filling, given the game's origins) at the center is its deliciously deranged single-player campaign. I really don't know where to begin with this, folks, so bear with me. You play as 14-year-old Ten Mawasu, an average, if unusually petite, Japanese schoolboy. He moonlights along with his little sister Uzu (both of their names are puns on Japanese words meaning "spin/spiral/rotate") as a Super Sentai hero charged with saving the world on a regular basis. By achieving 100 RPM–which he most frequently does by turning frenzied somersaults on a gymnastic bar, though a ballet pirouette or traditional Japanese dance will do in a pinch–the transformation bracelet on his wrist is activated, and he magically metamorphoses into Mawasunder Orange: champion of justice and protector of children everywhere.

You'd think that would be enough glamour for any middle schooler, but no... Ten is also looking for *love.* Going along with a scheme concocted by his little sister, he agrees to chat up five of the cutest girls in school, each based on a moe stereotype: The traditional Japanese maiden, the American exchange student, the distant, quiet Rei Ayanami type, the boisterous Osaka transplant, and the freaky I See Dead People psychic chick. Unfortunately, just when Ten is about to make some headway with the girls, he's invariably called away to perform his superhero duties. These take the form of one of Furu Furu Park's 30 minigames, which are wonderful mindless fun, if predictably Wii: Rotate stacks of sushi to feed customers, smash an evil alien robot to bits with a giant hammer, rev the handle of your totally awesome Harley in time with the beat, etc. etc.

Upon completing the superheroic task, Ten will receive a "keyword" used to woo the ladies, loosely related to the minigames. Choose the right responses and they'll gradually begin to warm up to him; select the wrong one and they'll act like he doesn't even exist. For those of you unaware of the genre, this entire affair is a broad and searingly accurate parody of the exclusively Japanese "romance simulator." Even if the inspiration is lost on you, the lunatic, hallucinatory scenario and characters will most certainly not be: It's sort of like a mad alchemist's combination of Tokimeki Memorial, Power Rangers, Um Jammer Lammy, and a John K. cartoon.

Furu Furu Park is the first Wii title we've covered in Play Japan, and I think it's also the platform's first game worth importing. Nintendo is fond of citing the gameplay experiences that are only possible on Wii, and this game is certainly that. It is also an *aesthetic* experience only possible on the platform, or perhaps one with similarly micro-sized development costs like the DS: In this day and age of megabudget sequels, a game as unrepentantly far out as Furu Furu Park just could not get made on any other system. I only hope it doesn't stay stuck in Japan forever.

Hapless boy superhero Ten Mawasu embarks on his quest to win the hearts of the five cutest girls in school, aided by his little sister Uzu (and pet pig Bogey, the porcine computer genius).

Furu Furu Park	score 8.0
+	Loopy aesthetic, quality single-player experience
–	Load times between mini-games is excessive

System(s)	Nintendo Wii
Developer	Taito
Publisher	Taito
Available	Now Japan, Unannounced US

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Sacred 2 Fallen Angel

Honor the gods

words Mike Griffin

What a pleasant surprise: Ascaron is developing an Xbox 360 version of Sacred 2 alongside the PC version. For those who missed out on the original Sacred, Ascaron's take on the action RPG did many good things. It provided a massive world, imaginative variations of player classes, superior animation, and an auto-sorting inventory to manage thousands of possible items. It was also pretty rough in spots, having launched a few patches too early. Ascaron is a busy German developer working on several contract projects, but Sacred is their baby. They are pouring resources into the sequel.

With generous texture effects and plenty of flowing hair and clothing, characters displayed abundant detail in an early version of Sacred 2. Huge rock elementals had complex reflective layers, an awesome red dragon strafed across vast mountaintops and the elven area had exotic Myst-like architecture with radiant specular highlights. Seraphim, the beautiful earthbound angel, will return from the first game, alongside the Shadow Warrior, High Elf, Inquisitor, Dryad and Temple Guardian. We spoke to Hans-Arno Wegner, Ascaron's Creative Director, for further details.

Sacred 2: Fallen Angel	
System(s)	PC, Xbox 360
Developer	Ascaron
Publisher	TBA
Online/Multi	Co-op and PvP, Live
Available	Q1 2008

interview

Hans-Arno Wegner, Creative Director - Ascaron

play: Diablo-style action RPGs have made a comeback recently with games like Sacred, Dungeon Siege and Titan Quest. When you set out to make the Sacred sequel, how did you feel you could add something new to the genre?
Hans-Arno Wegner: Sacred 2 will bring the player an atmospheric depth that no action-RPG has reached before. The world and the storytelling will be very intense. The player can choose from two campaigns, depending on his intent for the fate of Ancaria, and each character has its own background and motivation. The shadow campaign will run parallel to the good campaign, but from a different perspective: protagonist and antagonist will be reversed. Sacred 2 will offer hundreds of quests, depending on the campaign, the character and your chosen god. To have a different god will also have impact on very strong god spells and certain side quests. Sacred 2 is an action RPG, so we placed a great deal of focus on the characters and their development.

Does the world have an ongoing AI life cycle?
A very important aspect of Sacred 2 is the living world we have: All NPCs will have their own life and routine—their own day and night cycle. The world is also more interactive by using physics and new means of transport, like boats.

How are you going to present Sacred 2's story to the player?
There will certainly be dialogue—players will be interacting with a diversely populated land filled with lively NPCs. These characters will react to the player in dynamic ways based on his or her exploits across Ancaria, thus allowing them to be the motivating factor in the world-spanning story. Key story elements will all be presented in rich cut-scenes.

"The quality of the Sacred 2 graphical approach demonstrates that we aimed to be even more detailed than overhead 2D graphics."

~ Hans-Arno Wegner, Creative Director – Ascaron

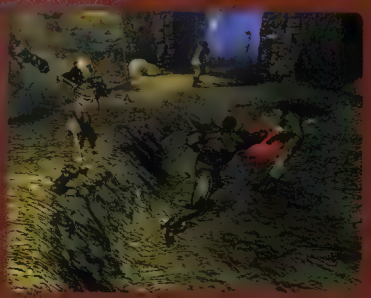
How many unique playable classes are you planning?
Sacred 2 has six completely unique characters for players to choose from, each with its own complete skill set and three unique aspects, consisting of several combat arts that represent a specific tactical playing style. Lots of customization will be available within each character. In addition, depending on the character chosen, players will be able to set out on either the light or the shadow campaign, approaching the story and the world of Ancaria from different angles. Players who select the Seraphim, for example—she's making her triumphant re-appearance from Sacred 1, may choose to become the hero of the land, whereas choosing the new Shadow Warrior character will tempt players to conquer the world instead of saving it.

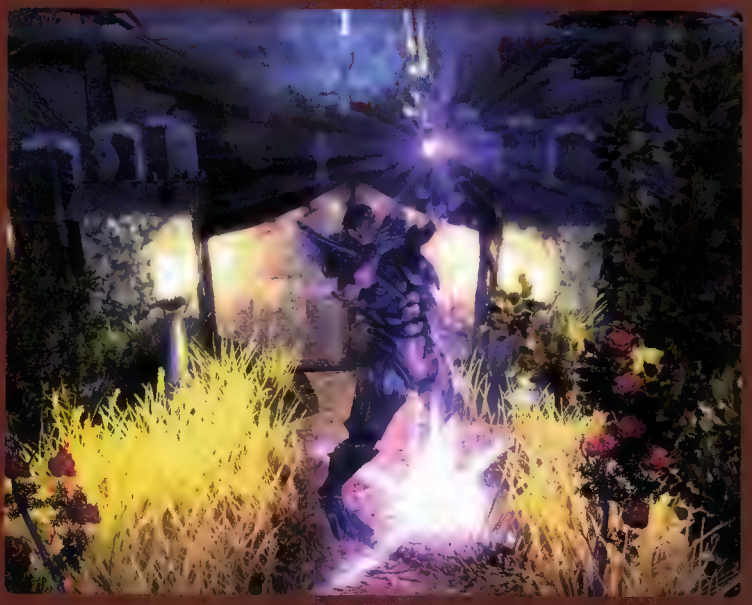
Tell us about the game's 3D engine and how it helps your gameplay design. We assume you support all the big shader buzzwords, but what you are doing with your engine to enhance expression?
We absolutely support all the shader features. We decided to develop our own engine because only this could allow us to deliver the quality we wanted for Sacred 2. One of the main challenges for the engine has been the streaming: In Sacred 2, the player can seamlessly move in the world wherever he wants to—even in dungeons and houses. The important challenge was to get as much detail on the screen as possible. The quality of the Sacred 2 graphical approach demonstrates that we aimed to be even more detailed than overhead 2D graphics.

Is Sacred 2 going to be more of a single-player campaign focused game, or a multiplayer slaughter?
The game will accommodate both single players and groups with a number of game modes. Players will, naturally, be able to experience the rich and engaging single-player campaign, but they can also bring friends along for the journey in co-operative mode through two-player split-screen or up to four players on Xbox Live, as well as LAN play and Open and Closed network options on the PC. Those who are looking for a more competitive experience can fight for leaderboard spots through the PvP and PvE arena modes, as well! In the PC version it will be possible to have a look on the Leaderboards and the achievements within the closed-net-lobby for both PVP and PVE. We're really hoping to cater to all modern preferences.

Player Mounts

Following Sacred 2's more is better mantra, players of all six classes will be able to collect handy mounts that can be used to dash across Ancaria's huge streaming world. This is Seraphim's tiger. The Shadow Warrior gets a hell hound.





Hardware Preview > Notebook PC

Alienware Area-51 m9750

In the laptop of luxury

words Mike Griffin

Earlier this year we reviewed Alienware's Aurora m9700 notebook and praised the performance of this formidable AMD-based power user laptop. It will soon be time for the m9700 to welcome a new family member to Alienware's elite notebook fold: a sleek black invader with serious muscle known as the Area-51 m9750.

Intel is representing in the Area-51 m9750 with a brand spankin' new overclocked Core 2 Duo—the fastest mobile processor on the planet. It's no secret that Intel has been running away with most of the performance benchmarks lately and this multiple core solution should prove to be a multitasking king. Do you use Nero or other video editing software? Imagine compressing movies on a laptop while running several other CPU-intensive programs, now without the stutters and hiccups that you experienced in the past. This Core 2 Duo is that fast. A good processor is meaningless if it isn't paired with plenty of fast system RAM, especially if your machine is running Windows Vista. The Area-51 9750 comes loaded with up to 4 GB of smoking fast DDR2 memory. If you do any sort of high RAM-dependent gaming (MMO players please stand up), a big bank of memory makes a huge difference. In a notebook, it's positively heavenly.

Another important enhancement in the m9750 comes in the form of graphical horsepower. This mobile dominator can be ordered with twin GeForce Go 7950 GTX cards. Yes, that's two cards running together in SLI for monstrous 3D rendering and 1 GB of video RAM. It's practically scandalous to have this much power inside a notebook. We had a chance to ask Bryan de Zayas, the product marketing manager at Alienware's notebook division, how his company leapfrogs the competition with these custom designs. "Above all

Alienware Area-51 m9750	
[illegible]	Intel Core 2 Duo Processors (2MB Cache, 667MHz FSB)
[illegible]	Dual Graphics Cards 512MB NVIDIA GeForce Go 7950 GTX GDDR3
[illegible]	Up to 4GB Dual Channel DDR2 at 667MHz
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"...a striking 17-inch 1920 x 1200 resolution LCD widescreen, capable of displaying true 1080p high-definition video."

else, Alienware focuses on the customer experience. Alienware drives to deliver the best experience whether the user is gaming, editing high-definition videos or even running military simulations in the field. To accomplish this, we only utilize the highest performance and highest quality components, coupled with industry-leading engineering."

This brings us to the glorious storage options of the Area-51 m9750. We live in an era of iPod, TiVo, YouTube, broadband and high definition; an era of information overload that eats tiny hard drives for breakfast. The m9750 can be equipped with up to 400 GB of internal hard drive space. That's a lot of music. It's also plenty of room for high-definition video. Conveniently, the Area-51 m9750 can be equipped with a striking 17-inch 1920 x 1200 resolution LCD widescreen capable of displaying true 1080p high-definition video. Let's say you're more of a disc-based movie watcher; the m9750 has you covered with an optional Blu-ray Disc drive to watch all the latest high-def movie releases. More of a TV couch potato, looking for your Lost fix? Use the m9750's integrated TV tuner to record television broadcasts directly to your hard drive and

Maximum performance takes more than minimum requirements.

take the show on the road. You can't do that with a DVR box. The m9750 also has great 7.1 digital sound (output to a surround receiver with ease), instant wi-fi, and integrated webcam.

To reiterate the Area-51 m9750's feature set would be pointless. Suffice to say, this notebook is the epitome of extreme mobile power and it's going to stay that way for a healthy period of time. While its feature set is designed to dazzle with big names and numbers, it's really the balance of this notebook that should be commended: the attractive m9750 has been built to master scenarios that would challenge almost any desktop PC, yet it's been carefully engineered to retain a strong notebook elegance, regardless of configuration.

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Postscript

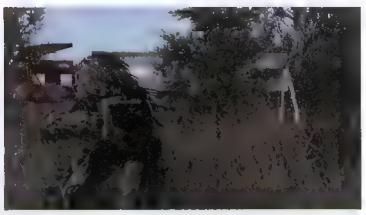
Call of Duty 4 — It's official

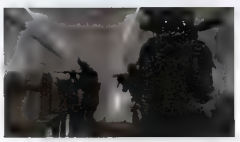
Infinity Ward at the helm for modern war extravaganza

Anyone with a passing interest in the FPS genre tuned-in to watch the Call of Duty 4 trailer at the end of April. Besides the stylized facial close-ups, the footage seemed certifiably in-game. You can spot evidence of real-time, like shaky stencil shadows. Infinity Ward's community manager has now confirmed that all the footage was taken, "...directly from the SP campaign, so you're looking at the actual gameplay you'll get to play. All the action is actual in-game action captured from the SP of the game. And just to set things straight, there's not a single asset—animation or otherwise—reused from a previous game." Whoa, that's impressive. Officially titled Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare, Infinity Ward's massive sequel will be an exception to the rule this year by not embracing Unreal Engine 3. CoD 4's impressive engine is entirely in-house, and it's taking on mammoth proportions for this modern combat spectacle.

Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare looks to be sweating the small details too. The game will apparently feature dynamic environments where you can do stuff like knock down walls, kick in doors and blow out bridges. Similarly, objects like furniture or vehicles can be used to barricade areas, and you can rappel down walls. In CoD 4's harsh Middle-Eastern urban environs, such tactics will surely come in handy. This modern war isn't focused on one region, however. Several counter-terrorist hotspots will be featured over the campaign, including Russian and eastern European nations. We appear to have US Army, US Marines and British S.A.S. in early images. We also identified the HUD from a Lockheed AC-130 gunship: a large, heavily armed, multi-personnel ground attack aircraft used exclusively by the US Air Force.

CoD 4 will up the ante in character movement and interactions. Melee moves like sliding tackles and leg sweeps will compliment running knee slides and launching to prone behind cover objects. Critical hit locations—and how they are handled—on the game's soldier and vehicle models will purportedly make previous wartime shooters seem obsolete in this department. Much speculation exists regarding the game's multiplayer status and also which platforms the game will release on. Infinity Ward is shooting for a fairly high online number, likely greater than 32-players for the game's large scale modes. Only the PC version has been confirmed by Activision thus far (great news for PC people still reeling from the lack of CoD 3), but we'd bet dollars-to-bullets that it's coming to Xbox 360 as well. In any case, Call of Duty 4 will be paradropping before the end of the year.





Top-Selling Software
Week of April 15 - April 21, 2007

	Command & Conquer 3: Tiberium Wars	Electronic Arts
	World Of Warcraft: Burning Crusade Expansion Pack	Vivendi
	World Of Warcraft	Vivendi
	The Sims 2 Celebration Stuff Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
	The Sims 2 Seasons Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts
	The Sims 2	Electronic Arts
	Lord of the Rings Online Shadows Of Angmar	Midway
	Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion Shivering Isles Expansion Pack	2K Games (Take 2)
	Stalker: Shadow Of Chernobyl	THQ
	The Sims 2 Pets Expansion Pack	Electronic Arts

Warhammer Online delayed until Q1 '08

Good news for some, like daggers to the eyes for others, EA Mythic has made it official: Warhammer Online won't be surfacing before early 2008. Taking advantage of the additional resources and manpower afforded to the team since EA's acquisition, EA Mythic has opted for a longer production cycle and a more extensive beta period (set to begin this fall). We're pretty happy with the news; this is the kind of sacrosanct property that you can't afford to rush out before it's cooked. Fans would strike it down like an Orc Choppa's axe.

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トップをねらえ2

Gunbuster 2

Robots Piloting Robots

Before we jump headlong into the mirthful joys of *Gunbuster 2*, I'd like to pull out a pipe and a large leather chair, and discuss a little history. Hopefully the fireplace behind me won't make the room too hot; I know it is June already.

In 1988, Hideaki Anno (he who would later go on to make *Neon Genesis Evangelion*) made his directorial debut with *Gunbuster*. A six-episode OVA featuring hard-core science fiction tempered with anime parody, *Gunbuster* was the prototype for a lot of elements of *Evangelion*, and was one of the few early anime released to VHS to hit here in the states.

When Gainax began to celebrate its twenty year anniversary, they turned to *Gunbuster*. The new OVA was to be directed by FLCL superstar Kazuya Tsurumaki, and feature the crazed kinetic energy of new Gainax experimental pieces. The story was set up as independent of the first series, so that old and new fans alike could join together to enjoy it. Other than a few references to the soundtrack of the original *Gunbuster* series, *Gunbuster 2* is completely independent. You don't need to know anything about the 1988 release at all.

Ahem. Putting down the old wooden pipe and leaping up from my chair, I can now shout and cheer about how much I loved *Gunbuster 2*. *Gunbuster 2* is the story of a robot named Nono, who dreams of someday becoming a pilot and defending the earth from Space Monsters. When her small café is caught in the crossfire of an intergalactic battle, she gets her opportunity to join the Fraternity and become a robot pilot—known charmingly as a "Topless." Sweet Nono doesn't get the title, and tears off her shirt when she's ready to fight.

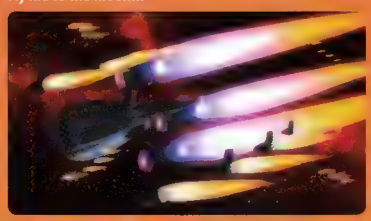
The action is awesome, the animation frenzied and unbuckled, and the characters are so eager and fun that I challenge Gainax fans not to like the show. Tsurumaki really shows off his cadence with FLCL-style breaths and pauses (mixed with extraordinary, energetic sequences) which make this new show seem somewhat reminiscent of his earlier work, but still fresh and unprocessed. It seems like an anime made from The Love of Anime, and even though it sometimes stumbles on its own speed, the enthusiasm behind every cel carries it towards an impressive and satisfying climax.

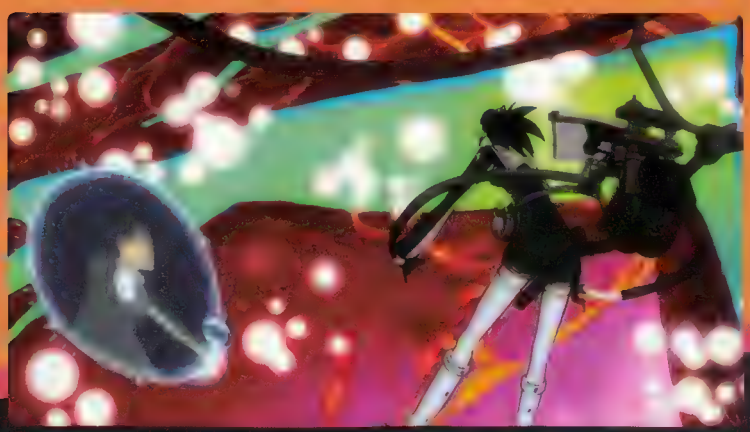
And there's no dub! So you have to watch it the way it was meant to be

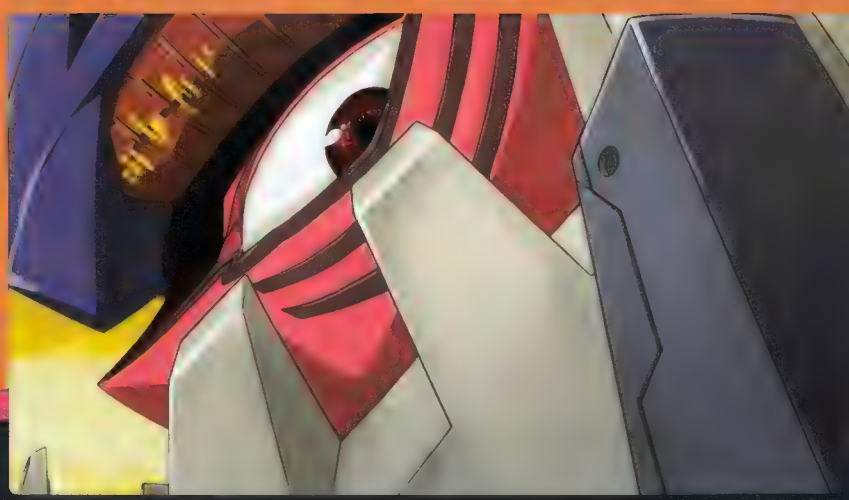
Gunbuster 2	score 9
+	Fast paced, fun, and mirthfully elegant
−	Expensive disks for only two episodes.
Released By	Bandai Visual
Volume	1
Running Time	60 minutes
Episodes	2
Rating	13 and up
Available	May 22

"I challenge Gainax fans not to like the show."

Fly me to the moon...







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009-1

ゼロゼロナインワン

Hoffman. . .Mylene Hoffman

words Dave Halverson

If I had a dollar for every sermon I've given about how select anime titles would appeal to a mass audience if only they had the exposure, I could retire to Bangkok and become the world's first video game-playing, anime-watching Yak farmer.

Forget for a minute that *009-1* will be aimed at folks who fancy dressing up in various items found at Home Depot and focus on the material at hand… You like James Bond? You want better? This is better. *009-1* may be based on a dusty old series from the '60s centered on 8 male androids, but this is 2007 and anime producers know full well what American males like: action, intrigue, and, well, you can guess the rest. *009-1* has it all and more, stir-fried to perfection in a super spy sauce.

Inspired by Ishinomori Shoutarou's 1963 series *Cyborg 009*, *009-1* delivers a similar super spy spin, beginning with a cold war episode complete with a token villain (Ivan Godnov) bent on turning the West into a large barbecue pit. Stepping into the Bond role is the lovely Mylene Hoffman, field commander of the elite Double Zero intelligence division:

"009-1 has it all and more, stir fried to perfection in a super spy sauce."

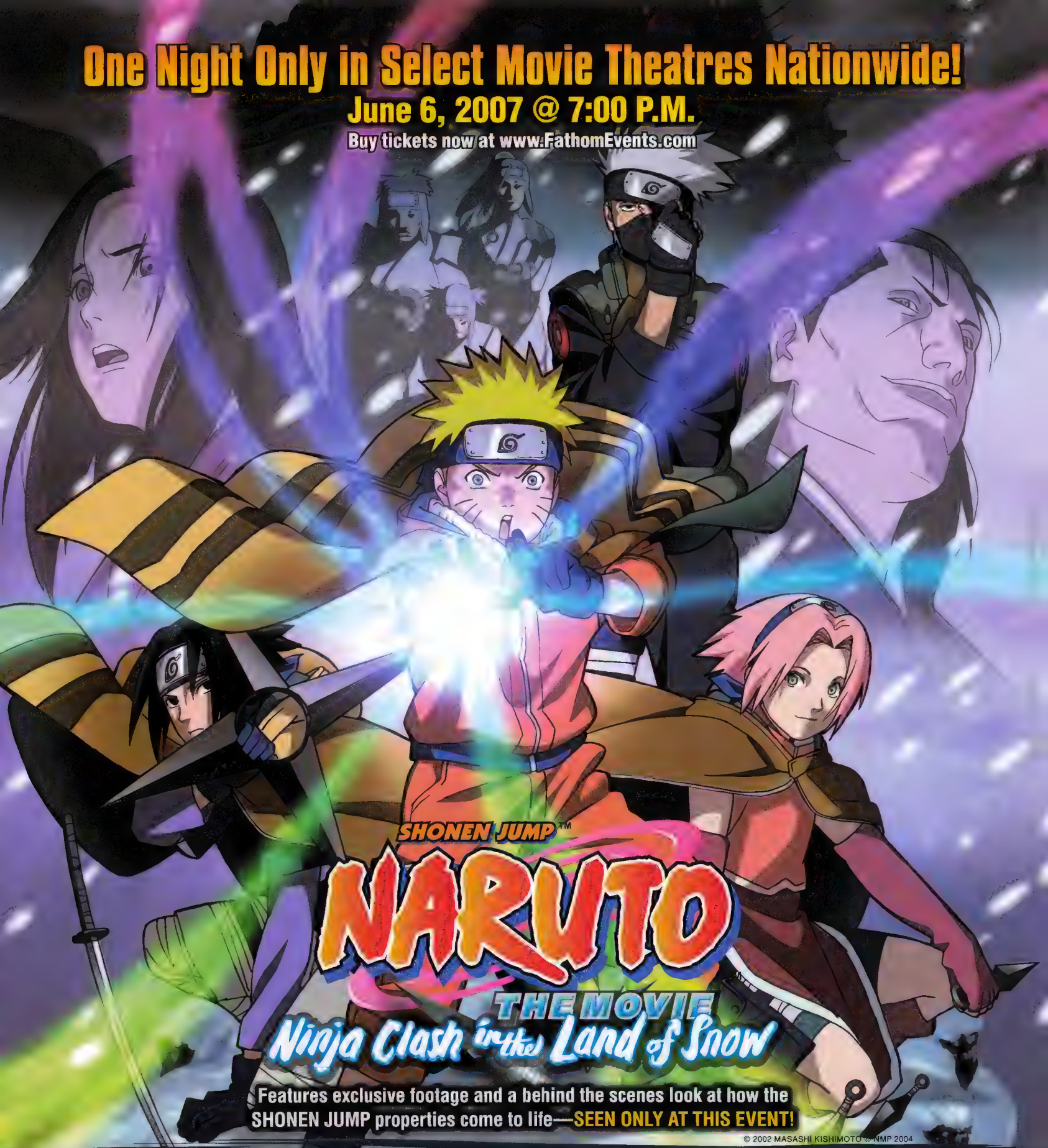
part seductress, part assassin, but all (artificial) woman, accompanied by four accomplishes, each with her own specific skill. Call it Ocean's 4…with double-Ds.

Everything about this production is top notch. The animation, soundtrack, and localization are superb and while it's most definitely sexy, it's also every bit as intelligent as anything Hollywood or gaming has brought to the genre…and there are still 200 delectable minutes to come.

009-1 score **9.0**

	Great animation, storylines, soundtrack, and, well…just look at her.
	Hmmm…oh, I know! Godnov's nose. Is that a…

Released By	ADV Films
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	1-5
Rating	TV-MA
Available	June 19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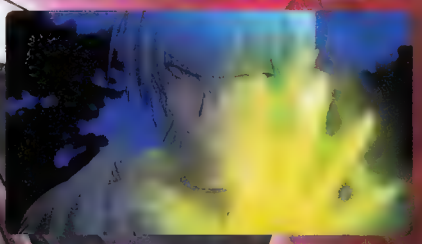
Karin

No Bad Blood Here



Words Bill Gray

With the veritable blood bank of vampire anime that's spilled our way recently, Geneon's *Chibi*—er, *Karin* is as refreshing as a glass of tomato juice on a long plane flight. An about-face from such downers as *Trinity Blood* or *Hellsing*, *Karin* takes the vampire genre 180 degrees in a different direction, even going so far as to imbue its heroine, a guileless high school girl named Karin Maaka, with the "reverse vampire curse."

Instead of fearing light, crucifixes, garlic, or any other traditional vampire repellent, Karin loves them all—in fact, she can't even see much of anything in the dark. Along with these changes, instead of needing to suck blood to survive, Karin actually overproduces blood, necessitating that she inject blood into her "victims." If she goes too long between forced transfusions, blood shoots out of her nose as if she were Keitaro, of Love Hina fame, seeing Naru's panties. A misfit in both the human and vampire worlds, Karin's dreams of a simple, normal life ebb away when a new transfer student, Kenta Usui, makes her blood boil even more than usual, though she doesn't for the (un)life of her know why.

As Karin tries to figure out why Kenta gets her all hot and bothered, we meet her parents, as agreeable a couple of typical vampires as you'll find anyplace, as well as her loli-goth little sister and rakish older brother. Cheerfully installed in their gothic mansion, Karin's family lives a typical Japanese life, albeit from sundown to sunup instead of the reverse. You know how in medieval times it was thought you could let "bad humors" out of the body by bleeding folks? Well, in *Karin*, vampires serve much the same purpose—by sucking our blood, they drain us of such vices as pride, lies, and even stress. Makes me wonder why people hate and fear vampires in the first place.

Alternatingly cute and raucously funny, *Karin* is one of the more bizarre anime I've seen in a while (and for anime, that's saying a lot). Providing more situational, rather than straight-up wacky humor, *Karin* is a refreshing change of pace from the joke-a-minute, frenetic pace of Nerima Daikon Brothers or Ninja Nonsense. The English dub, however, doesn't match the same heights as either NDB or Nonsense. Karin's voice, in particular, tended to grate after about the fifth time she said "I'm embarrassed," and made me want to watch the show subbed a mere 10 minutes into the first episode. In every other way, Karin establishes herself as a worthy heroine—sweet, earnest, ditzy, and naive—and it will be a treat to watch her and Kenta's relationship coagulate.

"Karin is one of the more bizarre anime I've seen in a while (and for anime, that's saying a lot.)"

Karin

score 8.0

+ Seeing Karin getting herself into a multitude of embarrassing moments.

- Hearing her whine about how embarrassed she is over and over and over again.

Released By	Geneon Entertainment
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	4
Rating	13+
Available	Now

"Espionage With a Science-Fiction Twist."

– *Anime Insider*

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Suzuka

words Heather Campbell

Will Suzuka land in Yamato's arms?

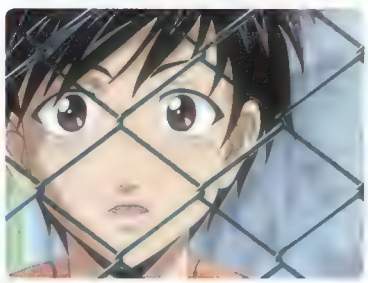
Whenever I'm talking about anime with someone who has no exposure to the format, I usually end up arguing about the idea of anime as a genre. For general conversation, fans will exclaim, "I love anime," ... and that's totally fine. I'm not about to deconstruct colloquial use of the word anime, and I don't take issue with people who are self-proclaimed anime enthusiasts. Hell, I call myself an anime fan when pressed.

But the truth is anime is not a genre. It's a general format for delivering a story. A Space Robot Fighting Show is not in the same genre as an Art School Relationship Show, regardless of the fact that they're both animated in Japan.

What's more, there are genres that are specific to anime—genres that, to my knowledge, do not appear outside of the format. The Harem Series (*Negima, Love Hina, Girls Bravo*, etc.) is seemingly limited to anime, and usually tells the story of a sexually frustrated male surrounded by women who adore him. It's standard male fantasy stuff, and I'm not judging the genre for it. There are a wealth of harem anime that I enjoy.

Now, *Suzuka* is a harem anime. To distinguish itself from the crowded field, it is also a series about sports. When Yamato Akitsuki moves to Tokyo to go to high school, he is overwhelmed by the grace of a young track-and-field starlet, *Suzuka*. His crush is complicated when he realizes that she lives in the same building as he does, which also happens to be a public bath for women. Yamato joins the track team to impress Suzuka ... who will take 26 full episodes just to give him a chance. Compounding his feelings are the women who surround him at the bath—each one determined to make their way into his life. With a backdrop of athletics, Suzuka sets up simple metaphors of competition and communication, interweaving the difficulties of Track and Field with relationships.

The problem with *Suzuka* isn't its standard setup, nor the bland character designs. First and foremost, *Suzuka* is poorly animated, and by the fourth episode of the first disk you can start to see the seams coming apart. If the quality of animation in a show isn't a hurdle for you, then the story (and its moderate pace) should be satisfying. If you're looking for a sharp production piece however, you should probably steer clear. *Suzuka* is about the tenacity of the heart, not the dynamism of the presentation.



Suzuka	score 8.0
+	Melodramatic but heartfelt, and has sports sequences!
–	Uninspired character designs

Released By	FUNimation Productions
Volume	1
Running Time	100 minutes
Episodes	1-4
Rating	16 and up
Available	June 12

"The story of a sexually frustrated male surrounded by women who adore him."

MPD-Psycho

Bloody Brilliant

words Bill Gray

CSI bugs me. For all of its slick production values, the show is a paean on death, depicting oftentimes bizarrely created corpses in various states of undress. Though this should repulse and horrify me, if I start an episode, I can't turn away—I'm compelled by the mystery, the story the corpses tell, and yes, by that darker part of me that's titillated by the crime itself. *MPD Psycho*, from Dark Horse, is *CSI* in richer, more complex, and more brutally gruesome manga form.

Haunted by dark, bloody dreams on the trail of a serial killer, detective Kobayashi Yasuke suffers a mental earthquake when the murderer strikes too close to home (think the end of *Se7en*). The emotional trauma fractures Yasuke's mind, "killing" the personality of Kobayashi and leaving behind a host of others (hence the "MPD," Multiple Personality Detective, of the title). Yasuke's dominant personality is Kazuhiko Amamiya, a detached profiler that the police use to help solve their cases. Amamiya finds employment with a detective agency specializing in solving violent murders and begins to unlock the mystery of his own mind.

With its exceptionally graphic and expertly drawn depictions of death and mutilation, *MPD Psycho* shouldn't be touched with an eleven-foot pole by children, the faint of heart, or the completely sound of mind. The rest of us are in store for a twisting, twisted ride through the mind of a complete lunatic. Be warned: once you get on this roller-coaster of a manga, you're locked in until the ride ends.

Read it if... You want to see what CSI's manga big brother would look like.

MPD-Psycho	score 9.0
Publisher	Dark Horse
Volume	1
Story	Eiji Otsuka
Art	Sho-u Tajima
Genre	Horror
Rating	18+

This is your brain on manga.

Murder Princess

Needs a Prince Harming...

words Heather Campbell

Murder Princess is a guilty pleasure, plain and simple. Only, I don't really feel guilty about liking it. Clearly, with the gorgeous cover and high quality paper, Broccoli Books didn't feel bad about giving it varsity treatment, so why should I feel bad about indulging in the story of Alita Forland, the desperate queen running from a government takeover?

Alita falls off a cliff and knocks heads with Falis, a beautiful bounty hunter. And as we all know, every time you bump your head, your soul switches into another body, right? Right. So Falis is now the bloodthirsty Murder Princess ... until she takes the throne and becomes the Murder Queen, I guess.

Fighting mecha maids, mad scientists, and more, Falis (in the body of Alita) decides to clean up the kingdom she just inherited. And poor Alita? She's plenty happy cleaning up after her new friends. A proper princess wouldn't complain, anyway. The art is sweet, the paper is high-quality stock, and the book feels well put together. So, go ahead—indulge in a little guilty pleasure. You don't have to feel guilty about it.

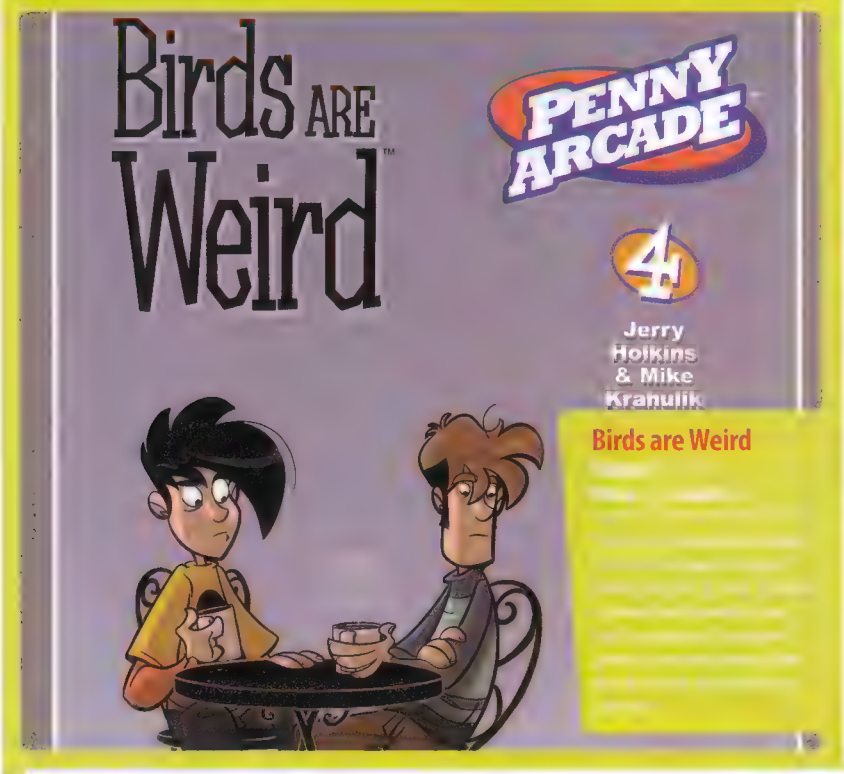
Read it if... You like cheese with your manga.

"Fighting mecha maids, mad scientists, and more..."

Murder Princess	score 8.0
Publisher	Broccoli Books
Volume	1
Story	Sekihiko Inui
Art	Sekihiko Inui
Genre	Action Fantasy
Rating	13+

anime essentials

laugh (hard) at this



watch this

3x3 Eyes

Publisher: Geneon Entertainment **Rating:** 13+
Available: June **Genre:** Horror

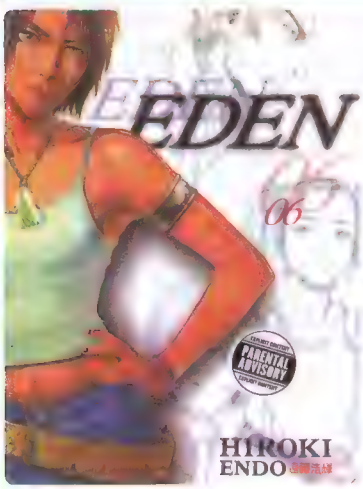
The classic series about powerful three-eyed demons that possess the secret of immortality returns this June in the first of 2 installments on DVD and Blu-ray disc. Set the date.

Samurai 7 Complete Collection

Publisher: FUNimation Productions **Rating:** TV PG
Available: Out Now **Genre:** Adventure/Sci-Fi

In case you missed its stunning run, the masterful retelling of Akira Kurosawa's classic is now available in a 7 disc, 26 episode Complete Series edition. There's no better way to spend 600 minutes.

read this



Eden: It's an Endless World!

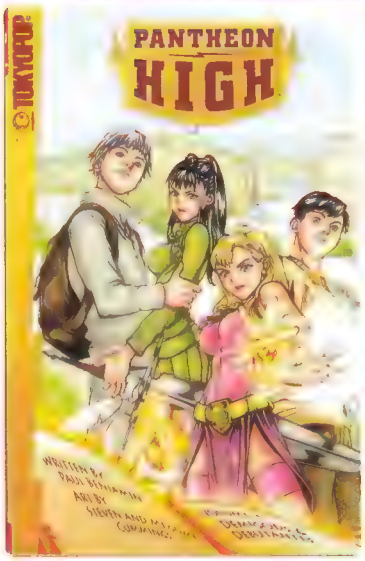
Dark Horse Manga | Mature | Sci-Fi | Volume 6 | Out Now

Hiroki Endo's oft times bleak but immeasurably heart felt post apocalyptic epic, now in its sixth volume, is absolute requisite reading; manga fan or not. If you read one sci-fi series this year make it Eden. …But you can't read just one!

Kia Asamiya presents Junk Record of the Last Hero

DrMaster | 15+ | Sci-Fi | Volume 2 | Out Now

Now that Hiro has the owner's manual will things change or will the suit that's plunged his life into a tragedy far worse than the bullies at school continue to terrorize the city? Don't miss Junk!



Pantheon High

TokyoPop | 16 and up | Action/Fantasy | Volume 1 | Out Now

Ever wonder where the children of Greek, Norse, Japanese, or Egyptian divinities go to school? Pantheon High of course, located in sunny Los Angeles. You can guess the rest… This is one fun read.

Stray Little Devil

DrMaster | 13 and up | Fantasy | Volume 4 | Out Now

When Pam Akumachi is accidentally transported to a parallel world where devils and angels co-exist the only way home is to become a full fledged devil, and the only way to read about how she does it is in the beautifully illustrated Stray Little Devil.

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Cutie Honey

Directed by: Hideaki Anno
Starring: Eriko Sato, Mikako Ichikawa, Jun Murakami
Released By: Bandai Entertainment
Rated: 13 and up

Adapted from the spirited anime, *Cutie Honey* is now available in the flesh, but have no fear, the anime hasn't got anything on this feisty live-action parade of rubber suits and revealing under garments. For the uninitiated, Cutie Honey is anything she wants to be; office worker, street musician, motorcycle racer, police officer… thanks to her father's invention the I-System, which also allows her to transform into Cutie Honey—the warrior of love! It's out of her underwear and into action as the gender bending Panther Claw organization begins kidnapping girls and stealing gold all over Tokyo—part of a diabolical scheme hatched by their leader Sister Jill to regain her beauty (and does she ever need it... can you say mannish?) and become immortal. Together with the reluctant but ever-so sexy police officer Natsuko, and Seiji, a mild mannered TV reporter with a funny hat, it's Cutie Honey to the rescue as she takes on a posse of villains that could bankrupt the latex industry forever!

Although *Cutey Honey* slowly degrades into a super-charged Power Rangers episode, it's both the epitome of eye candy and the most fun you'll have watching a DVD this year. The villains are absolutely priceless and the effects, both digital and makeup, so spirited this one should come with a money-back guarantee. For my money I'll take *Cutie Honey* over any number of been-there-done-that contrived US actioners any day. It's sexy, funny, dynamic, and 100% super-charged good fun for you! **Dave Halverson**

The Host

Directed by: Joon-ho Bong
Starring: Kang-ho Song, Hie-bong Byeon, Hae-il Park, Du-na Bae, Ah-sung Ko
Released By: Magnolia Pictures
Rated:

Once upon a time Japan led the way in monster movies with *Godzilla*, arguably the most iconic and influential sci-fi series in the history of cinema. Since, we've done all we can to muck up the works (with a few exceptions like *King Kong*) capped off by a US version that made all of those rubber suit extravaganzas seem almost plausible. I actually appreciated the scope of Roland Emmerich's *Godzilla*; it was the cast and especially the story that made it oh-so hard to watch. Fast forward a few decades and it's Korea's turn to up the ante—only on a smaller scale, with *The Host*, a creature feature along the lines of *The Relic* or *Virus* that once again, sets the bar sky high. *The Host* begins like many a US creature feature with the initial main character prologue and monster reveal—only better than I have ever seen it done—but then it veers into unfamiliar territory as it begins to tell a real human story. Where most American-made features send in a handful of protagonists for us to watch get sequentially picked off, *The Host* goes about its business as such a disaster might likely really unfurl, complete with government cover-ups and true human suffering. I don't want to give anything away—you absolutely must see this film—so all I'll say is that *The Host* is never what you expect and is filled with Oscar-caliber performances. Better have a look before Hollywood remakes into another adaptation for the ADD set. **Dave Halverson**

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BACK OF THE BOOK

06 _07 ERIC PATTERSON
ASSOCIATE EDITOR

I'm supposed to go where with whose dog?

Tetris Evolution and Settlers of Catan. Two games for the Xbox 360, both very different in their own ways, but both very similar in one specific aspect: both games feature text that I absolutely cannot read on my television.

For all of the growing pains that one may have been expecting to crop up as the video game market began its eagerly awaited and long overdue switch to the glorious world of high definition, something as simple as the size of in-game text was not only never high on that list, but was probably never even a consideration. Text in games was always something you just took for granted, save for those times when the developer chose a font that was a pain to read, or when cut scenes could have benefitted from subtitles yet none were presented as an option. As we played games, we read mission text, character dialog, scrolled through option screens, kept tabs on match rankings, and entered our names after getting that high score we had been after for so long.

Something then changed. The problem may not have started with Dead Rising, but Capcom's next-gen loveletter to zombie fans everywhere was the first time many of us suddenly realized that something was amiss. Not having had the chance to play the game in any capacity before release–except for a quick five minutes at last year's E3, where Microsoft presented the game on crisp, beautiful HDTVs–I, like many, rushed out to my nearest game retailer the day Dead Rising went on sale, tearing open the package and dropping the game into my Xbox 360 the moment I walked through my front door. All of that excitement and anxiousness turned to shock, then dismay, then frustration as the blocks of text tell me where to go and what to do appeared onscreen, and I found myself struggling to tell if I was even looking at English or not.

Talk began to spread around the internet about Dead Rising and its text size issue. You must have a crappy TV, some said. (I'll admit, my current TV probably seems quaint compared to some HD behemoths, but it's a very nice set otherwise.) Stop using composite and switch to using component, others recommended. (Myself, I already was.) Once those arguments against why some of us were having problems reading the text were shot down, our fellow gamers on message boards and internet chat rooms decided it was simply our faults for still having yesterday's television: if you're going to have an Xbox 360, then get an HDTV, and stop complaining. The backlash against SDTV owners was amazing, and really disappointing; games shouldn't be held back, even if a majority of homes don't yet contain an HDTV, but that doesn't mean that non-HDTV owners should be punished in the process.

I ended up putting Dead Rising away on my gaming shelf, saving it for a time when I did indeed own an HDTV and could fully appreciate it, and I came away with no hard feelings towards either the game or Capcom. Companies were still learning the ropes of producing high-def games for high-def consoles, so it was a simple mistake, one from which the industry would learn a valuable lesson and work hard to make sure never happened again.

Yet, here we are, in the spring of 2007, and over the past few days, the two games I've played on my Xbox 360 have both had text that is unreadable on my television set due to its small size. At this point, I simply find this unacceptable.

Now, let's be fair here: beyond the simple poetry randomizer game I wrote in Pascal back in high school, my understanding of games is pretty equal to my understanding of cars. I enjoy them, I know how to turn them on and control them, but I'll be damned if I know what is going on under that hood. That said, how this problem has been allowed to be an issue in so many games, and why games can't be developed with scalable user interfaces and fonts that can be adjusted to make the most of your particular display I simply cannot understand. As somebody who designs and develops websites, I have a deep respect for and interest in user interface, especially in how it feels and functions. If I designed a web page where the various interface elements or content text looked great on my 1440x900 widescreen display, but couldn't be read by many users on monitors with lower resolutions, people would be calling for my head.

I know that, to some of you, this all seems like a very small problem. (Pun intended.) If you have a nice 42" plasma hanging on your wall, small text in the latest Xbox 360 or PlayStation 3 title probably isn't a problem. Heck, this isn't even a problem for all SDTV owners, as different sets of different sizes handle picture quality differently; some non-HDTV gamers have this problem, others don't. What we have to understand, though, is that video games live or die by how they connect with you, the player, and how well they succeed in immersing you into the game's world. If such a simple and basic piece of the connection–like the game's font being readable for everybody–is broken, a great disservice has been done to that player.

> "A product is only as strong as its smallest and seemingly most insignificant parts, and video games are no exception."

The situation reminds me a lot of Apple, and my complaints concerning Mac OS X. I love the OS, and with each revision, Apple gives us big, amazing, super-cool new features that wow and dazzle fans and critics alike. But while we get things like Expose and Dashboard and Time Machine, little things all across the OS go neglected and desperate for fixing and updating. A product is only as strong as its smallest and seemingly most insignificant parts, and video games are no exception.

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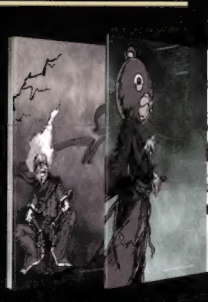

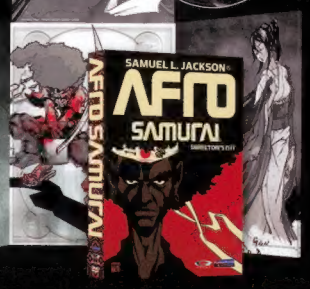

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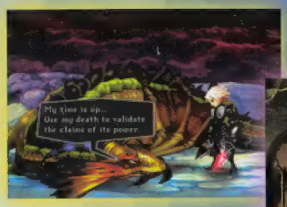

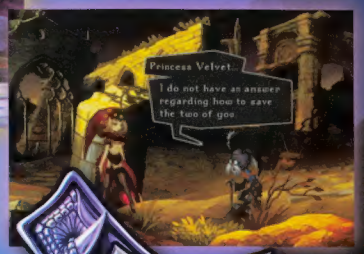

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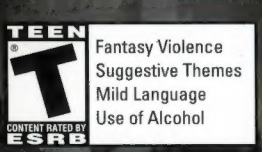

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